

Joy in the Midst of Evil and Vanity

Ecclesiastes 5:8 If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

⁹ But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.

¹⁰ He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is **vanity**.

¹¹ When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?

¹² Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

¹³ There is **a grievous evil** that **I have seen under the sun**: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt,

¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand.

¹⁵ As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.

¹⁶ This also is **a grievous evil**: just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?

¹⁷ Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.

¹⁸ Behold, what **I have seen** to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.

¹⁹ Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil-- this is the gift of God.

²⁰ For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.

^{ESV} **Ecclesiastes 6:1** **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**.

³ 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, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.

⁴ For it comes **in vanity** and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered.

⁵ Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he.

⁶ Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good-- do not all go to the one place?

⁷ All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied.

⁸ 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?

⁹ Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite: **this also is vanity** and a striving after wind.

(Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9)

The Return of Secular Sages

We have seen a remarkable thing in the way I have approached Ecclesiastes up to this point. For chapter after chapter, we have heard the secular sages of the age

commenting in abundance on many of the same things that Ecclesiastes had seen as vanity and evil under the sun. Then, suddenly, they were silenced. We saw that they had nothing to say about the religious center of Ecclesiastes, because such a man has no ability to know how to rightly approach the living God. This was an appropriate stoppage of their mouths, even as it was of our own as we considered the Most High God who is in heaven while we are on the earth.

Now, just as quickly as their insight left them, they are suddenly able to see many of the same things that Ecclesiastes turns anew to consider.

- **Ecclesiastes:** If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness... (Ecc 5:8)
- **Poison:**

*I drive by the homeless sleepin' on a cold dark street
Like bodies in an open grave
Underneath the broken old neon sign
Used to read "Jesus saves"
A mile away live the rich folk
And I see how they're living' it up
But while the poor they eat from hand to mouth
The rich are drink' from the golden cup¹*

¹ **Poison**, "Give Me Something To Believe In," *Flesh & Blood*, Capitol (1990).

- **Ecclesiastes:** Riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture ... As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. (5:13-15)

- **Me'Shell Ndegeocello:**

Sadness fills my heart

Too weak to get by, slave to discontentment self-pity

*I come forth from my mother's womb naked shall I return to the earth to go
as I came*

Taking nothing of this supposed worldly gain²

- **Ecclesiastes:** He who loves money will not be satisfied with money... his soul is not satisfied with life's good things ... his appetite is not satisfied. (5:10; 6:3, 7)

- **The Rolling Stones:**

I can't get no satisfaction

I can't get no satisfaction

'Cause I try, and I try, and I try, and I try

I can't get no, I can't get no³

² Me'Shell Ndegeocello, "Ecclesiastes: Free My Heart," *Peace Beyond Passion*, Maverick (1996).

³ The Rolling Stones, "(I can't Get No) Satisfaction," *Out of Our Heads*, Abkco Music Inc. (1965).

How interesting is it that **secular people**, people who never for one second would pretend to be Christians, can see things like this? But this is **part** of the riddle and enigma that is Ecclesiastes and the sermon of the Preacher. It is **part** of why it is so interesting that unbelievers are drawn to this book. It is **part** of the reason why it is so important that we **interpret it**—as I believe he himself would want us to—*as believers in the same God*, rather than as those with a totally different worldview.

Ecclesiastes 5:1-8—Context and Structure

Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9 has been **studied extensively**. It contains one small and one much larger unit. The small unit might be **vv. 8-9**, though it may go through **vs. 12**. For the sake of preaching this passage, I'm going to look at it as going through 12. It is generally agreed upon that the larger unit is **5:10-6:9**, which we will look at more in a moment. Last time we saw the great importance of approaching God properly in his temple and it is important now to understand that this was **the center** of (at least) a structure that the passage today now takes us to the end of:

A. Evil in Society (3:16-4:12)

B. Power (4:13-17)

C. Cult (5:1-7)

B'. Power (5:8-9)

A'. Poverty-Wealth (5:10-6:9)⁴

Vv. 8-9 can be summarized at dealing with **power**, especially of a **king**. In this way, they match **4:13-17** which also deal with the king abusing his power. **5:10-19** are summarized by poverty and riches, and these match **3:16-4:12** which dealt with the same.

5:10-6:9 can be viewed either as a set of **parallel outlines**:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| I. There Is an Evil (13a) | I. There Is an Evil (6:1) |
| A. Riches Possessed (13b) | A. Riches Possessed (2a) |
| B. Riches Lost (14a) | B. Riches Lost (2b) |
| II. Begetting (14b) | II. Begetting (3a) |
| A. Having Nothing (14c) | A. Having Nothing (3b) |
| B. Coming and Going (15-16a) | B. Coming and Going (4, 5) |
| III. What Advantage from Toil? (16b) | III. What Advantage from Toil? (6, 7a) |
| A. No Satisfaction (17) | A. No Satisfaction (7b) |
| B. Contentment (18-20) | B. Contentment (9) ⁵ |

Or as a **chiasm**:

- A. Limitations to Satisfaction (5:10-12)
- B. Coming and Going in Darkness (5:13-17)
- C. God's Blessing or God's Curse? (5:18-19)**
- C'. God's Blessing or God's Curse? (6:1, 2)**
- B'. Coming and Going in Darkness (6:3-6)
- A'. Limitations to Satisfaction (6:[5], 7-9)⁶

⁴ **Naoto Kamano**, *Cosmology and Character: Qoheleth's Pedagogy from a Rhetorical-Critical Perspective*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 125. Corrected to match the English verses.

⁵ **Daniel C. Fredericks**, "Chiasm and Parallel Structure in Qoheleth 5:9-6:9," *JBL* 108 (1989): 17-35.

⁶ Fredericks. He has many more letters to it in his article.

However, it is also probable, and I think preferable to see *our entire unit* as one large chiasm:

- A People Who Cannot Be Satisfied (5:8–12)
- B People Who Cannot Enjoy (5:13–17)
- C What Is Good (5:18–19)
- D Enjoy the Moment (5:20)**
- C' What Is Bad (6:1–2)
- B' People Who Cannot Enjoy (6:3–6)
- A' People Who Cannot Be Satisfied (6:7–9)⁷

Longman has said, “Structure is a problem throughout the book ... but fortunately it rarely makes a significant impact on interpretation.”⁸ I agree with him about the problem, especially in the smaller sections of the book, as the kinds of structures change and there is no uniform way that the repeats itself in terms of how the Preacher wrote his sermon. He is using all kinds of literary devices under the sun. I also agree that *much* of the time, this isn't all that important. However, we have seen that it *can* be *very* important (such as our discussion of the structure of 3:1-8). Sometimes, seeing

⁷ Modified from C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 18C, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008), 217; Kamano, 136; Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 147. Griselda Banks, “Finding Joy in Money: A Chiastic Outline of Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9,” *slideplayer.com* <https://slideplayer.com/slide/6007121/>.

⁸ Tremper Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 160.

how it is written can be very helpful in seeing what the Preacher himself is trying to highlight.

I believe this is especially important in this passage. While there are ways of arriving at the following using either the outline or the 5:10-6:9 chiasm, when we see the entire unit as a whole, it becomes very easy to spot the center. And that center is deliberately juxtaposed with opposites in some very interesting and startling ways.

In this case, the center is something like “enjoy the moment.” So why would that matter? As we go through, we will see several other reasons. However, I’ll give you three things to think about here. First, consider that he has two phrases each used four times in our passage. These are, “vanity” (5:10; 6:2, 4, 9) and “a grievous evil” (5:13, 16; 6:1, 2). Sandwiched right in the middle of these evils and vanities is “the gift of God” (5:19) or what someone has translated as “the supreme good” (18).⁹ That gift, is joy! Only when you see the structure for what it is, does this joy present itself to you so that you can contemplate it as you should.

Next, enjoying the moment just so happens to also be the center of the seven “joys” of the sermon:¹⁰

⁹ N. Lohfink, “Qoheleth 5:17–19—Revelation by Joy,” *CBQ* 52 [1990]: 625.

¹⁰ Monica Marie Cardona Pérez, *A Time for Joy: A Study of the Themes of Time and Joy in the Book of Qoheleth* (Madrid: Comillas Universidad Pontificia, 2020), 10-11. <https://repositorio.comillas.edu/rest/bitstreams/424870/retrieve>.

- Ecc 2:24-26
- Ecc 3:12-13
- Ecc 3:22
- **Ecc 5:18-20**
- Ecc 8:15
- Ecc 9:7-10
- Ecc 11:7-10

These seven joys multiply with the perfect number a thought that otherwise gets lost in all the vanity. As the central joy, it might be called **the joy of joys!**

Third, based upon these seven joys, the idea of “seeing,” and the idea of “vanity,” a very interesting **parallel to the joys** appears in that **5:18-20** is quite possibly the very center of the book itself:

- A. 1:1-11
- B. 1:12-2:11
- C. 2:12-23
- D. 3:24-3:12
- E. 3:16-22
- F. 4:1-6
- G. 4:7-5:12
- H. 5:13-17
- I. 5:18-20**
- H'. 6:1-12
- G'. 7:1-8:7
- F'. 8:8-15
- E'. 8:16-9:10
- D'. 9:11-12
- C'. 9:13-10:3
- B'. 10:4-20

In other words, it isn't just that God grants the gift of joy in the middle of evil and vanity (which is itself an unheard of blessing to an unbeliever), but that he does so as the central takeaway theme of all *the things done under heaven* and under the sun, *but only as God's gift to those who fear him!* This is one of main purposes of Ecclesiastes. When all is seen and heard about life in the toil and pain of this world, what can the wise person take away from it? Not sorrow. Not anger. Not regret. Not trouble. Not horror. Not toil. Not evil. Not even vanity or vapor or mist or emptiness or eating and drinking or good. But rather, *joy!* When you consider the immediate context of wealth and money and power and all the corruption it causes in our passage, this becomes especially interesting to think upon.

¹¹ Tzemah Yoreh, "Symmetrical Structures in the Writings; Ecclesiastes Symmetries English," *Biblical Symmetries*, http://www.biblecriticism.com/symmetrical_structures.html. Also (though totally in Hebrew) Tzemah Yoreh, "Happiness, What is it Worth?" *Beit Mikra* 46 (2002): 353-370. https://www.academia.edu/18513265/Happiness_what_is_it_worth. The same thing is seen to a lesser extent in David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis – Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 192-198 and in the structures of n. 4.

Because I said last time that 5:1-7 could be the center, but now am saying that this may be the center, let's think of 5:1-7 as the *theological center* of the book while 5:17-19 is the *literary and thematic center*.

Power and Oppression (5:8-12; 6:7-9)

As we move through **all but the center** of our passage, we will see that the various contexts surrounding this supreme joy truly demonstrate the fact that someone who is able to enjoy this life indeed has a gift from God. As I said, those things that surround the passage are evil and vanity, so of course, to be able to enjoy life (not the evil of this life, but the good in the middle of it) must be a gift from God!

The first thing we see is an observation about **oppression and injustice** in this world. The way I'm looking at it, he calls it "**vanity**" (10). "**If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness...**" (5:8). We saw something similar in 4:1. "**Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun.**" In that instance, his focus was on how there is no one to comfort the oppressed. Now, his focus is on the **injustice** itself.

It is not entirely clear what is going on in this text, though, the injustice is **systemic** and deals at least in one sense with **government**.¹² Government is seen in the

¹² Longman says, "**All approaches to this verse recognize that Qohelet describes difficulties with the political system.**" Longman, 157. The words are difficult to translate. I'm going to stick with the ESV and many other translations, though Seow (202-04, 18) and others have shown that the words do not seem to be able to bear this more restricted reading. Instead, they think it refers to any kind of injustice, be it in government or business or anywhere else one might find it. But since that is too large of a bunny trail to explain, I'm sticking with the ESV.

mentioning a “**province**” (we might say a state or a county or even a region), a “**high official**”¹³ and in the next verse, a “**king**.” These are then people who rule in government over others. The system is then how this government operates. Governments act according to systems and rules. This government is doing something to a group of people called “**the poor**.”

All cultures are able to see systemic injustice. Thus, he says, “**If you see...**” But they do not always look at it the same way. If you put on those **Marxist glasses** that have been handed out to every student at every level of public education and in many of our Evangelical and Reformed churches in recent years, and look at injustice as a purely group identity politic of the **bourgeoisie vs. the proletariat**, or to put it in the current parlance—white Christian men vs. everyone else (unless, of course, any among those “everyone else” start talking like white Christian men, whatever that means), then you will identify the problem as coming from a group of people who can’t help but discriminate and commit heinous acts of injustice because they are inherently evil and privileged. They in turn *necessarily* harm everyone else, everyone else who is inherently good and by definition poor, a

¹³ **Seow**: “arrogant ones.” See previous note.

group which if they got into power couldn't possibly be prone to the same tendencies because they are not evil.

This is not justice. This is *social* justice or *economic* justice, *racial* justice, *environmental* justice anything else that nullifies actual justice with some adjective. True justice is blind. These other ideas are anything but blind. You can't correct justice with something else and still have justice.¹⁴ This is not what the Preacher is talking about.

Instead of blaming impersonal stereotypical groups, Scripture, as it always does, blames **individuals** for how they oppress the poor. These are individuals who commit oppression or injustice—whatever their color, whatever their status, whatever their backstory either directly or indirectly through bad laws and evil bureaucracy. What are they doing? Some think this could refer to the “**red tape**” of middle management that makes life so difficult for the poor that they never get justice because it is eternally delayed.¹⁵ But the word for “**violation**” normally has to do with **robbery, extortion, and usury**.¹⁶ These, then, are people in power who achieve anything they want at other's expense. In

¹⁴ A great little video detailing this is **Allie Stuckey**, “Social Justice Isn't Justice,” *PragerU* (May 4, 2020), <https://www.prageru.com/video/social-justice-isnt-justice>.

¹⁵ **Michael A. Eaton**, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), p. 101.

¹⁶ **Seow**, 218.

government, they are people who perpetrate their crimes while looking out for one another.

In *our* immediate context, it is not difficult to think of **professional bureaucrats**, lifetime politicians (rather than public servants) who enrich themselves by passing laws that help certain big corporations and harm the people while destroying the rule of law and a functioning republic, as they take money under the table. **Right now**, it may be easier to think of examples of this than at any other time in our history, but here's one to think about. It regards how many of our politicians have become **filthy rich** since their time in office. For example, when Obama went into the White House, he was worth \$1.3 million (2008).¹⁷ Today, he is worth at least 70 million.¹⁸ AOC went from a salary of \$21,875 in 2018¹⁹ to a net worth just five years later of \$29,000,000.²⁰ In fact, between 2004 and 2014, the top 20

¹⁷ **Hillary Hoffower**, "The Obamas are Worth 30 Times More Than When They Entered the White House," Financial Review (Sept 12, 2018), <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/management/the-obamas-are-worth-30-times-more-than-when-they-entered-the-white-house-20180912-h159bg>.

¹⁸ "Barack Obama Net Worth," *CelebrityNetWorth*, accessed July 12, 2022, <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-politicians/presidents/barack-obama-net-worth/>

¹⁹ Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, "Personal Finances [salary for 2018]" *Open Secrets*, last accessed July 12, 2022, <https://www.opensecrets.org/personal-finances/alexandria-ocasio-cortez/other-data?cid=N00041162&year=2018>.

²⁰ **Steve Bennett**, "Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Net Worth 2022 (Forbes) AOC Assets Salary Cars House," *CA Knowledge* (April 1, 2022), <https://cnowledge.com/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-net-worth-aoc/>.

members of congress (Rs and Ds) averaged a net increase of wealth of 422% a year.²¹ How? I'll leave that to your imagination except to say that they have no regard for the poor and lowly, as much as they might talk a good game. The Middle Class evaporates politicians become obscenely wealthy.

It is **easy to get discouraged** about such things. In fact, it is easy to get so **angry** that it consumes you. The Preacher says, “**Do not be amazed at the matter.**” Friend, there is nothing new under the sun. The ESV continues, “**for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.**” Again, **the meaning of the Hebrew is difficult** here. It might mean that these government “watchers” surveil the people (the poor peons plebe peasants) to take advantage of them. Or, it might mean that the higher ups are committing their own evil and thus are watching out for those lower down, protecting one another all the way to whatever top of the food chain actually exists out there. It is mafia style cronyism and the poor are left out in the cold.²²

²¹ Sarah Rosier, “Changes in Net Worth of U.S. Senators and Representatives (Personal Gain Index), *BallotPedia* (July 24, 2014), [https://ballotpedia.org/Changes_in_Net_Worth_of_U.S._Senators_and_Representatives_\(Personal_Gain_Index\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Changes_in_Net_Worth_of_U.S._Senators_and_Representatives_(Personal_Gain_Index))

²² Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 130.

Vs. 9 clearly belongs with vs. 8, but again its meaning is disputed. The ESV reads, “But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.” If this is the right interpretation, the meaning contrasts a righteous king with these evil officials. As Ryken says, “the best defense against government corruption is a godly king.”²³ However, it could be translated very differently. Something like, “The profit of the land is taken by all; even the king benefits from the field.”²⁴ Here, the king is part of the problem, not the solution. And of course, that’s the way most kings have always been. I’m going to return to this idea of the king at the very end so that you might rightly learn to think about this, whatever the Preacher’s observation actually is.

But let’s continue with the passage. While vs. 10 technically starts a new unit, I’m going to have us continue to think about it in terms of what we have just seen, primarily because the topic shift from abusing power to corrupting money can be very easily related to that power and government. “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income” (Ecc 5:10). “This,” Ecclesiastes says, “also is vanity.”

²³ Ibid., 131.

²⁴ Longman, 157.

The love of money. This is something the Apostles speaks about to Timothy. Paul does not say, as is so often erroneously thought, “**Money is the root of all evil.**” But rather, “*The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil*” (1Tim 6:10). Again, our sages recognize this. Pink Floyd sarcastically sings, “*Money. It’s a gas. Grab that cash with both hands and make a stash.*”²⁵ In the same Poison song I quoted earlier they observe,

*Well I see him on the TV
Preaching about the promised lands
He tells me believe in Jesus
Steals the money from my hands
Some say he was a good man
Lord I think he sinned²⁶*

Along these lines Luke tells us that **the Pharisees** “**were lovers of money**” (Luke 16:14). This is why they were so hypocritical. Their religion was a pretense and a farse, a ruse to make a lot of money and have a lot of power. But it isn’t just government and/or religion that has a problem, because this attacks the universal human **condition of sin**. The Preacher

²⁵ Pink Floyd, “Money,” *The Dark Side of the Moon*, Capitol Records (1973).

²⁶ Poison, *ibid.*

makes an observation about the love of money: “He who loves money *will not be satisfied with money*.” John D. Rockefeller was one of the richest men in the world, but when someone asked him how much money was enough, he famously said, “Just a little bit more.”²⁷ Someone has called this disease “Affluenza.”²⁸ And most Americans are stricken with it at least a little.

He gives the reason people will never be satisfied. “When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?” (11). To the average person, this could refer to the oppressive government that takes away our money through taxation. To the parent, it might be the sponging 40 year old child who refuses to get a job and move out. To a rich person it might be every person they’ve ever known (family, friends, strangers) begging them for help. The more money we have, the more people will want it. And there is no rest.

That fits well into vs. 12. “Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.” At some point, the rich can easily stop working and just start earning as the interest

²⁷ Ryken, 132.

²⁸ Jessie O’Neill, *The Golden Ghetto: The Psychology of Affluence* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1996), as noted in Ryken, 132.

compounds ever higher. Up, up, up the money goes, but with massive wealth comes **obsession** that causes one to worry about people stealing it, about losing it all in a crash, and about how he can always get more of it. **But the person who is working hard** all day long is naturally ready for sleep. They don't have time to fret; they need the rest. Ryken makes a true enough point about the language of the stomach in this verse. **“The idle rich do not enjoy this luxury but are up all night. This is not because they are worrying about all their possessions, like the rich fool in the parable that Jesus told (Luke 12:13–21), but because a gluttonous diet of fatty foods gives them a tummy-ache. Their insomnia is caused by indigestion.”**²⁹

Let's skip ahead to **6:7-9** to see the **parallel** before leaving this subject. It is very obviously related to this point. **“All the toil of man is for his mouth, yet his appetite is not satisfied”** (7). The rich eat to fill their mouths with caviar. But the more he eats, the hungrier he gets. The **appetite here is more than the belly**; it is of the insatiable lust for more and better stuff. This is the definition of Ecclesiastes' “vanity” throughout this sermon, and it is no wonder that he ends this section with that word (9).

²⁹ Ryken, 133.

Vs. 9 is in fact vs. 7's match. "Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the appetite." This proverb is the corrective. If you see something beautiful, leave it at that. Do not go wandering off in your mind to covet and pursue it at all costs. That leads to sin.

If vs. 7 is the fool who is never satiated and vs. 9 is the wise man who can control himself, vs. 8 is the middle. "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?" It is a general observation, as we've seen throughout his sermon, that at the end of the day, knowing how to conduct yourself does no more good than not. And given that "the living" are in mind, it clearly points us towards our end in the grave.

Evil: Coming and Going (5:13-17; 6:3-6)

You might think that is a hopeless kind of thought, but it springs out of the general observations that anyone can make about life on this earth. But more than that, it comes right after his reflections about coming and going from this life. So let's go back to ch. 5 and continue thinking about this new context.

Vv. 13-17 have the double, “There is a grievous evil” (13, 16) attached to them. It is an evil “I have seen under the sun,” and so it continues with these general observations that unbelievers can even see. We begin with a continuation of wealth. “Riches were kept by their owner to his hurt” (13), for “those riches were lost in a bad venture” (14). I said earlier that one of the things that might keep a rich man up at night is losing all his wealth. Now we see that this is something Qoheleth observed! They gambled and lost. He played the shorts in the stock market and got burned. They took out a huge loan on a billion-dollar hotel and went bankrupt.

But the direction now changes. “And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand” (14b). Now he has nothing to give his children. He was a fool. “As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand” (15). Given that this seems to be reflecting upon Job (Job 1:21), we can now extend this thought to God bringing about disaster in our lives. This may not be only about the fool anymore. And the point is to get us to think about the fleeting nature of life and that we can’t take anything with us, even if we still had it.

Vs. 16 is parallel with a new “grievous evil” “Just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?” You come into this world with nothing. You leave with nothing. Those are **the rules**. Given this truth, simply observing this fate of all men, it seems that again, all work is a striving after wind, a pointless chase that you will never be able to finish or win.

It gets worse. “Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger” (17). We can hear more Job here. **Job** was a man who had everything taken from him: great wealth, all his children, his house, his health. Job was utterly perplexed and all alone in the darkness of what was happening to him. And he became angry. Job was righteous, but God brought terrible things into his life at the hand of the supernatural Accuser who wanted him to curse and God and die. But, of course, we’ve been thinking about the wicked rich who harm the poor and who gobble up wealth like it is chocolate mint Girl Scout cookie only to find themselves unsatisfied, deprived of sleep, full of inner misery.

The parallel is in 6:3-6. “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, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he” (6:3). The comparison of a stillborn child to a man like this is stunning. A child that is born dead is better than this old man with many children? That’s what he says. Why?

First, because “he also has no burial.” What does that mean? It likely refers to the fact that at his death he is treated with contempt. That would in turn be because he was a terrible person. So, even with a huge family, everyone hated him so much that they won’t even bury his body.

Second, the stillborn child “comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered” (4). It is interesting that Psalm 58 attacks the wicked human rulers, people we’ve already seen today. It says, “Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun” (Ps 58:8). We all think of the stillborn child as a terrible evil. It’s entire life on this planet is darkness—darkness in the womb, darkness of thoughts, darkness of identity, many don’t even get a name from their parents. The Preacher says that the man who is never satisfied so much that he gets no burial is worse off than this.

But the comparison is not finished. “Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he” (Ecc 6:5). This is a morbid truth. The body of a

lifeless infant is as rest. The insatiable, unquenchable, always thirsty rich man, especially those who do evil to others, they have no rest. And so the dead infant is better off.

Even more, “Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good—do not all go to the one place?” (6). The patriarchs prior to the Flood averaged lives less than half this, and those ages are nearly 10 times longer than the oldest people alive today. 2,000 years is the span of an age in the Great Year. It is an inconceivably long period of time. Transhumanists today want to live forever. Even more malevolent people seek eternal life through insane evil like human sacrifice and drinking blood (and other things), especially of children.³⁰ The Preacher is saying that it doesn't matter how long you live, if you can't enjoy the good, then what does it matter? Everyone dies and goes to the same place. Think on these things the next time you envy or can't sleep over the wickedness of the wicked, the obscene wealth of the rich, the corrosive power of the elites. They live in utter misery so much so that this dead child is better off than they. And they will eventually die. This starts

³⁰ I was listening to a podcast this week (an interview with my friend JSlay and his guest David Sorensen) a whistle blower who was at the highest levels of corruption among the elite who came out of it swears that she knew a (hybrid) man who was over 800 years old, who gained his long life through the kind of cannibalism and blood sacrifices that are matched only by the worst kings of Israel. Crazy.

to hint at the Christian reading of our passage, but we need to look at one more thing first.

Joy: God's Blessing and Curse (5:18-6:2)

In all that I've pointed out here, **vs. 6** has only just hinted at it. These observations about never being satisfied come on the heels of **the center of the passage**, which is put in a **positive and then negative** form. Let's look at the negative first. We are talking about joy now.

“There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: 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” (6:1-2). Let's dissect this. First, he calls this “**an evil**,” “**a grievous evil**” and “**vanity**.” This is as bad as it gets. Second, it **lies heavy on mankind**. It is not confined to one person but is found everywhere.

Third, he focuses in **on God**. This is the first time we've seen God today. Specifically, he says that God gives wealth, possessions, and honor such that a man lacks nothing of anything he desires. Solomon could sure relate to this. But it is

important to say that this is not just (or even primarily) about God giving this to those who fear him. Rather, **God gives this to *whomever he pleases***. Furthermore, the context, as we have seen, is quite often people who are anything but righteous. The theological statement here is that they are not getting it themselves, but **God is giving it to them**. This is about God's **absolute sovereignty** to do what he wants with whomever he wants, so that no man can boast. In this case, it is unending material possessions and all that they have to offer in this life (“under the sun”). *God* gives these things. As such, **they are a gift**.

And yet, **God does not give him the power to enjoy them**. This is just as amazing as the former statement. God must give a person the ability to enjoy the very gifts that he gives them. The vanity is that someone else enjoys them. Anyone *but* him! What futility. He spends his entire lifetime trying to acquire these things, doesn't realize that they were given to him by God, and therefore can't enjoy the very thing—the only thing—he cares about pursuing. That is meaningless hopelessness if ever there was such a thing. It is a great evil. I would call it **a curse**, a curse upon a man who is being blessed! Oh, the irony.

This brings us to **the very center** (structurally and thematically) of the entire book. It begins in **Ecc 5:18**, “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for **this is his lot.**” He calls this “**good.**” In fact, it as we saw, it can be translated as “**the supreme good.**” It is the opposite of the **bad** in **6:1-2**. As a supreme good, it must be very important!

The Preacher has practically said before. “**There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find *enjoyment* in his toil**” (**2:24**). This “**first joy**” of the seven in Ecclesiastes goes on to say the following, “**This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have *enjoyment*? For to the one who pleases him *God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy*, but to the sinner he has given the business of gathering and collecting, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a striving after wind**” (**Ecc 2:25-26**).

This is also very **similar** to **5:19**, “**Everyone also to whom *God has given wealth and possessions and power...***” And, we saw, this was nearly word for word what we find also in **6:1**.

I want to continue with what it says in 5:19 by noticing the second “joy” of Ecclesiastes. It has a very similar doctrine: “I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and *to do good* as long as they live; also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure *in all his toil—this is God’s gift to man*” (Ecc 3:12-13). God’s gift to man is exactly what 5:19 concludes with, “this is *the gift of God.*” The remainder of 5:19 shows us that this indeed is the central joy of the book, “Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, *and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God.*”

It is amazing to me that the third “joy” in the book is also similar again: “I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should *rejoice* in his work, for that is his lot” (Ecc 3:22), and that unbelievers such as John Mellencamp can see it themselves (for he puts it at part of the liner notes of *The Lonesome Jubilee*). In fact, the fifth “joy” (8:15) is against almost the same thing, as is the sixth “joy,” though it finally adds something new. Only when we come to the seventh “joy” will we see a significant change in terms of not talking about work and enjoying the fruit of our labor.

Seven “Joys” of Ecclesiastes

2:24-26	3:12-13	3:22	5:18-20	8:15	9:7-10	11:8-10
<p>There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God,²⁵ for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?²⁶ For to the one who pleases him God has given wisdom and knowledge and joy...</p>	<p>I perceived that there is nothing better for them than to be joyful and to do good as long as they live;¹³ also that everyone should eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil-- this is God's gift to man.</p>	<p>I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work, for that is his lot.</p>	<p>Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot.¹⁹ Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil-- this is the gift of God.²⁰ For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.</p>	<p>And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.</p>	<p>⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do.⁸ Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head.⁹ Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might...</p>	<p>⁸ So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all ...⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes ...¹⁰ Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body...</p>

But I do find one thing **curious about Mellencamp**. As I've said before, I've seen no evidence from anything he's ever said that he is a Christian. Yet he quotes and sings relentlessly throughout his career on Ecclesiastes. It is thus very curious to me that of these six parallel joys, **the only one that does not have the word “God” in it is the one he**

chooses (the third).³¹ And this is just the point that I must conclude with, if we want to read the book as the Preacher would have us rather than as we would have it.

Ecclesiastes 5:20 adds **two new thoughts** to the joys from the previous three. “**For he will not much remember the days of his life**” and “**because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.**” We’ve seen that God gives riches and wealth and possessions and power and he gives it to the Christian and non-Christian alike—a thought which itself startles not a few Christians who have been taught their theology from bad sources. We have seen that to one, God gives the gift to enjoy these gifts, while to the other, he does not. In fact, the language is so similar with these opposites, that it begs us to see **vs. 20 as the central verse** to all of the joys and thus, to the entire book, **thematically speaking**:

- 5:18-19:

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils

³¹ He cites entirely from the Living Bible (which itself is fascinating) in his liner notes. ^{1:3-7} Generations come and go, but it makes no difference. The sun rises and sets and hurries around to rise again. The wind blows south and north, here and there, twisting back and forth, getting nowhere. The rivers run into the sea, but the sea is never full, and the water returns again to the rivers and flows again to the sea . . . ^{1:8} everything is unutterably weary and tiresome. No matter how much we see, we are never satisfied; no matter how much we hear, we are not content. ^{3:22} So I saw that there is nothing better for men than that they should be happy in their work, for that is what they are here for, and no one can bring them back to life to enjoy what will be in the future, so let them enjoy it now.

under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil-- this is the gift of God.

- 6:1-2:

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: 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.

And that center, again, is that God keeps the man who enjoys these gifts busy so that he is occupied with the joy *in his heart*. He will be so busy that he will not remember the days of his life. It will go by fast; he will not be preoccupied with either stuff or evil that he can do nothing about (and no, this is not given as an excuse to do nothing about evil in the world). Importantly, this is the *first time the heart is mentioned* in the seven joys and the heart won't come to the forefront again until the seventh joy. In other words, this isn't just about somehow enjoying stuff. That's actually the opposite point and why life is such vanity and a great evil. This is about *the heart*.

So how does a person arrive at this enjoyment of the heart? Let's go back and think about these great evils and vanities that plague mankind in our passage. First, we have the abuse of power that comes from kings. It is incredibly easy to become so burdened and upset by this that you never enjoy a thing in life. You are always just angry and vexed at the horror that often makes up this world. But the Preacher said, "Do not be surprised" by this.

We saw in vs. 2 that a king is involved in the land. That is either being viewed as an evil king who is contributing to the problems of the aristocracy, senate, and the rest of government, or a good king who is its solution. In fact, it can certainly be both, and herein lies the first answer to how one God himself can actually bring joy to our hearts in the middle of such evil, joy that will be preoccupied with what he has given us in our own lots in life.

If the king is evil, then it only points to the need for a good king. That there is evil in this government only points out that there needs to be a government that is ruled by a good king. And this is precisely what we have with King Jesus. Isaiah predicted, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of *his government* and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with *justice* and with *righteousness* from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this” (Isa 9:6-7).

What Isaiah predicted, the NT clearly tells us **has come to pass**. Jesus was born **king of the Jews** (Matt 2:2). The crowds ushered Christ into Jerusalem with shouts of Hosanna to the king (John 12:13). Pilate put on his cross, “**This is Jesus, the King of the Jews**” (Matt 27:37). Jesus is now proclaimed as King (Acts 17:7)—King of kings (Rev 19:16). He sits at the right hand of power in heaven (Heb 1:3) and to him has been (not will be) given a **kingdom** which he even now is ruling in justice and truth and power and might. And all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him (Matt 28:18).

His kingdom is not of this world. You don’t look at it with your eyes and say, “**Here it is**” or “**There it is.**” For the kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21). In other words, *the heart*. This kingdom is known and seen **by faith in Christ**, by believing what you are told about him, by **trusting** that he is your King and that he does all things in righteousness

in his kingdom and nothing can thwart his rule or reign. But this takes **repenting** of your sin, knowing that you are prone to the same evils that so plague the thoughts of the Preacher that he calls them evil and vanity. Through repentance and faith in Christ, God in turn softens your heart and your works and your ways. And so **Didymus the Blind** said, “**When you see a soul that is well tilled, that sows with tears and is ready to reap with shouts of joy, then this tilled field has a king, the Logos, who leads, rules, and reigns**” (*Commentary on Ecclesiastes* 145.2).³²

It is only in this way that the enjoyment of all that we do which comes from God can so preoccupy us that we can have true joy, or as Jesus said, “**Life abundant.**” What is the cure to the “**Affluenza**” of so much that makes this world sick? What solves the dissatisfaction that comes from the love of money? You **must be satisfied in God through Christ.** Joel said, “**Behold, I am sending to you grain, wine, and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations**” (**Joel 2:19**). **This is Christ.** The Psalmist says, “**He satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things**” (**Ps 107:9**). The

³² Cited in **J. Robert Wright**, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture OT 9 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005).

promise is that “the afflicted shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD!” (Ps 22:26).

Oh that you would see the beauty of holiness and the splendor of God’s majesty. For that would take away the craving, that insatiable appetite of the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life. As Ambrose said long ago, “If you are desirous of treasure, take the invisible and the intangible which is to be found in the heavens on high, not that which is in the deepest veins of the earth. Be poor in spirit and you will be rich, no matter what your worldly goods are. ‘A man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions,’¹⁷ but in his virtue and in his faith. This richness will enrich you if you are rich in your relations to God” (*Cain and Abel* 1.5.21.). So “Why not,” as Athanasius tells you, “rather acquire those [things] that we can take: prudence, justice, temperance, fortitude, understanding, charity, love of the poor, faith in Christ, gentleness, hospitality? If we obtain these, we shall find them there before us preparing a welcome for us in the land of the meek” (*Life of St. Anthony* 17).

Then you would know the central truth of the Preacher’s sermon, the thing that the secular sages intentionally and deliberately set out to miss. You would know the

Joy of joys! *Joyful, Joyful, we adore Thee!* You would be joyful in all things and know that such joy extends not only to the spiritual realm, but to all that we are here and now under the sun. May God keep you occupied *in your heart* as you trust in Christ. And may you not remember the days of your life because you are so satisfied in him and his good gifts to you.

Longer Structure in Fredericks:

- A. Limited Satisfaction from Possessions (5:10, 12)
- B. Brevity of Possession (5:10-11)
- C. What Advantage? (5:11)
- D. Enjoy What Is in Sight (5:11)
- E. The Common Man (5:12)
- F. More Rest (5:12)
- G. Fathering Offspring (5:14)
- H. Coming and Going (5:15, 16)
- I. In Darkness (5:17)
- J. Those Affairs While I Have Seen to Be Good or Evil (5:18)
- K. A Gift of Wealth Enjoyed or Lost (5:19, 20)
- L. This Is a Gift, This Is Breath (5:19)**
- L'. This Is a Gift, This Is Breath (6:2)**
- K'. A Gift of Wealth Enjoyed or Lost (6:2)
- J'. Those Affairs While I Have Seen to Be Good or Evil (6:1)
- I'. In Darkness (6:4)
- H'. Coming and Going (6:4)
- G'. Fathering Offspring (6:3)
- F'. More Rest (6:5)
- E'. The Common Man (6:8)
- D'. Enjoy What Is in Sight (6:9)
- C'. What Advantage? (6:8)
- B'. Brevity of Possessions (6:9)
- A'. Limited Satisfaction from Possessions (6:7, 9)

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