

CHAPTER 6

In this chapter,

I. The royal preacher goes on further to show the vanity of worldly wealth, when men place their happiness in it and are eager and inordinate in laying it up. Riches, in the hands of a man that is wise and generous, and good for something, but in the hands of a sordid, sneaking, covetous miser, they are good for nothing.

- 1.** He takes an account of the possessions and enjoyments which such a man may have. He has wealth (v. 2), he has children to inherit it (v. 3), and lives long (v. 3, 6).
- 2.** He describes his folly in not taking the comfort of it; he has no power to eat of it, lets strangers devour it, is never filled with good, and at last has no burial (v. 2, 3).
- 3.** He condemns it as an evil, a common evil, vanity, and a disease (v. 1, 2).
- 4.** He prefers the condition of a still-born child before the condition of such a one (v. 3). The still-born child's infelicity is only negative (v. 4, 5), but that of the covetous worldling is positive; he lives a great while to see himself miserable (v. 6).
- 5.** He shows the vanity of riches as pertaining only to the body, and giving no satisfaction to the mind (v. 7, 8), and of those boundless desires with which covetous people vex themselves (v. 9), which, if they be gratified ever so fully, leave a man but a man still (v. 10).

II. He concludes this discourse of the vanity of the creature with this plain inference from the whole, That it is folly to think of making up a happiness for ourselves in the things of this world (v. 11, 12). Our satisfaction must be in another life, not in this.

~~200~~ ECCLESIASTES 6:1-6

THE MISERIES OF COVETOUSNESS

Solomon had shown, in the close of the foregoing chapter, how good it is to make a comfortable use of the gifts of God's providence; now here he shows the evil of the contrary, having and not using, gathering to lay up for I know not what contingent emergencies to come, not to lay out on the most urgent occasions present. This *is an evil which* Solomon himself saw *under the sun*, v. 1. A great deal of evil there is *under the sun*. There is a world above the sun where there is no evil, yet God *causes his sun to shine upon the evil* as well as upon *the good*, which is an aggravation of the evil. God has lighted up a candle for his servants to work by, but they bury their talent as slothful and unprofitable, and so waste the light and are unworthy of it. Solomon, as a king, inspected the manners of his subjects, and took notice of this evil as a prejudice to the public, who are damaged not only by men's prodigality on the one hand, but by their penuriousness on the other. As it is with the blood in the natural body, so it is with the wealth of the body politic, if, instead of circulating, it stagnates, it will be of ill consequence. Solomon as a preacher observed the evils that were done that he might reprove them and warn people against them. This evil was, in his days, *common*, and yet then there was great plenty of silver and gold, which, one would think, should have made people less fond of riches; the times also were peaceable, nor was there any prospect of trouble, which to some is a temptation to hoard. But no providence will of itself, unless the grace of God work with it, cure the corrupt affection that is in the carnal mind to the world and the things of it; nay, when *riches increase* we are most apt to set our *hearts upon them*. Now concerning this miser observe,

I. The abundant reason he has to serve God with joyfulness and gladness of heart; how well God has done for him.

1. He *has given him riches, wealth, and honour*, v. 2. Note,

(1.) *Riches and wealth* commonly gain people *honour* among men. Though it be but an image, if it be a *golden image*, *all people, nations, and languages*, will *fall down and worship it*.

(2.) *Riches, wealth, and honour*, are God's gifts, the gifts of his providence, and not given, as his rain and sunshine, alike to all, but to some, and not to others, as God sees fit.

(3.) Yet they are given to many that do not make a good use of them, to many to whom God does not give wisdom and grace to take the comfort of them and serve God with them. The gifts of common providence are bestowed on many to whom are denied the gifts of a special grace, without which the gifts of providence often do more hurt than good.

2. *He wants nothing for his soul of all that he desires*. Providence has been so liberal to him that he has as much as *heart could wish, and more*, ^{<9737>}Psalm 73:7. He does not desire grace for his soul, the better part; all he desires is enough to gratify the sensual appetite, and that he has; his *belly is filled with these hidden treasures*, ^{<9714>}Psalm 17:14.

3. He is supposed to have a numerous family, to *beget a hundred children*, which are the stay and strength of his house and as a *quiver full of arrows* to him, which are the honour and credit of his house, and in whom he has the prospect of having his name built up and having all the immortality this world can give him. *They are full of children* (^{<9714>}Psalm 17:14), while many of God's people are written childless and stripped of all.

4. To complete his happiness, he is supposed to *live many years*, or rather many *days*, for our life is to be reckoned rather by days than years: *The days of his years are many*, and so healthful is his constitution, and so slowly does age creep upon him, that they are likely to be many more. Nay, he is supposed to *live a thousand years* (which no man, that we know of, ever did), nay, *a thousand years twice told*, a small part of which time, one would think, were enough to convince men, by their own experience, of the folly both of those that expect to find all good in worldly wealth, and of those that expect to find any good in it but in using it.

II. The little heart he has to use this which God gives him, for the ends and purposes for which it was given him. This is his fault and folly that he *renders not again according to the benefit done unto him*, and *serves not the Lord God his benefactor, with joyfulness and gladness of heart, in the abundance of all things*. In the day of prosperity he is not joyful. *Tristis es, et felix?* — *Art thou happy, yet sad?* See his folly:

1. He cannot find in his heart to take the comfort of what he has himself. He has meat before him; he has wherewith to maintain himself and his family comfortably, but he has *not power to eat thereof*. His sordid niggardly temper will not suffer him to lay it out, no, not upon himself, no, not upon that which is most necessary for himself. He has not power to reason himself out of this absurdity, to conquer his covetous humour. He is weak indeed, who has not power to use what God gives him, for *God gives him not that power*, but withholds it from him, to punish him for his other abuses of his wealth. Because he has not the will to serve God with it, God denies him the power to serve himself with it.

2. He suffers those to prey upon him that he is under no obligation to: *A stranger eateth it*. This is the common fate of misers; they will not trust their own children perhaps, but retainers and hangers-on, that have the art of wheedling, insinuate themselves into them, and find ways of devouring what they have, or getting it to be left to them by their wills. God orders it so that *a stranger eats it*. *Strangers devour his strength*, ^{<100>}Hosea 7:9; ^{<150>}Proverbs 5:10. This may be well called *vanity, and an evil disease*.

What we have we have in vain if we do not use it; and that temper of mind is certainly a most wretched distemper which keeps us from using it. Our worst diseases are those that arise from the corruption of our own hearts.

3. He deprives himself of the good that he might have had of his worldly possessions, not only forfeits it, but robs himself of it and throws it from him: *His soul is not filled with good*, v. 3. He is still unsatisfied and uneasy. His hands are filled with riches, his barns filled, and his bags filled, but *his soul is not filled with good*, no, not with that good, for it is still craving more. Nay (v. 6), *he has not seen good*; he cannot so much as please his eye, for that is still looking further and looking with envy on those that have more. He has not even the sensible good of an estate. Though he looks not beyond the things that are seen, yet he looks not with any true pleasure even on them.

4. *He has no burial*, none agreeable to his rank, no decent burial, but *the burial of an ass*. Through the sordidness of his temper he will not allow himself a fashionable burial, but forbids it, or the strangers that have eaten him up leave him so poor, at last, that he has not wherewithal, or those to whom he leaves what he has have so little esteem for his memory, and are so greedy of what they are to have from him, that they will not be at the charges of burying him handsomely, which his own children, if he had left it to them, would not have grudged him.

III. The preference which the preacher gives to an untimely birth before him: *An untimely birth*, a child that is carried from the womb to the grave, *is better than he*. Better is the fruit that drops from the tree before it is ripe than that which is left to hang on till it is rotten. Job, in his passion, thinks the condition of *an untimely birth* better than his when he was in adversity (~~2016~~ Job 3:16); but Solomon here pronounces it better than the condition of a worldling in his greatest prosperity, when the world smiles upon him.

1. He grants the condition of *an untimely birth*, upon many accounts, to be very sad (v. 4, 5): *He comes in with vanity* (for, as to this world, he that is born and dies immediately was born in vain), and he *departs in darkness*; little or no notice is taken of him; being an abortive, he has no *name*, or, if he had, it would soon be forgotten and buried in oblivion; it would *be covered with darkness*, as the body is with the earth. Nay (v. 5), *he has not seen the sun*, but from the darkness of the womb he is hurried immediately to that of the grave, and, which is worse than not being known to any, he has not *known any thing*, and therefore has come short of that which is the greatest pleasure and honour of man. Those that live in wilful ignorance, and know nothing to purpose, are no better than *an untimely birth that has not seen the sun nor known any thing*.

2. Yet he prefers it before that of a covetous miser. *This untimely birth has more rest than the other*, for *this* has some rest, but *the other* has none; *this* has no trouble and disquiet, but *the other* is in perpetual agitation, and has nothing but trouble, trouble of his own making. The shorter the life is the longer the rest; and the fewer the days, and the less we have to do with this troublesome world, the less trouble we know.

*'Tis better die a child at four,
Than live, and die so at fourscore.*

The reason he gives why *this has more rest* is because *all go to one place* to rest in, and this is sooner at his rest, v. 6. He that *lives a thousand years* goes to the same place with the child that does not live an hour, ~~2016~~ Ecclesiastes 3:20. The grave is the place we shall all meet in. Whatever differences there may be in men's condition in this world, they must all die, are all under the same sentence, and, to outward appearance, their deaths are alike. The grave is to one, as well as another, a land of silence, of darkness, of separation from the living, and a sleeping-place. It is the common rendezvous of rich and poor, honourable and mean, learned and unlearned; the short-lived and long-lived meet in the grave, only one rides

post thither, the other goes by a slower conveyance; the dust of both mingles, and lies undistinguished.

~~<10>~~ ECCLESIASTES 6:7-10

THE INSATIABLENESS OF DESIRE

The preacher here further shows the vanity and folly of heaping up worldly wealth and expecting happiness in it.

I. How much soever we toil about the world, and get out of it, we can have for ourselves no more than a maintenance (v. 7): *All the labour of man is for his mouth, which craves it of him* (~~<16>~~Proverbs 16:26); it is but *food and raiment*; what is more others have, not we; it is all *for the mouth*. *Meats are but for the belly and the belly for meats*; there is nothing for the head and heart, nothing to nourish or enrich the soul. A little will serve to sustain us comfortably and a great deal can do no more.

II. Those that have ever so much are still craving; let a man labour ever so much *for his mouth, yet the appetite is not filled*.

1. Natural desires are still returning, still pressing; a man may be feasted to-day and yet hungry to-morrow.

2. Worldly sinful desires are insatiable, ~~<50>~~Ecclesiastes 5:10. Wealth to a worldling is like drink to one in a dropsy, which does but increase the thirst. Some read the whole verse thus: *Though all a man's labour fall out to his own mind (ori ejus obveniat — so as to correspond with his views, Juv.), just as himself would have it, yet his desire is not satisfied, still he has a mind to something more*.

3. The desires of the soul find nothing in the wealth of the world to give them any satisfaction. *The soul is not filled*, so the word is. When God gave Israel their request he *sent leanness into their souls*, ~~<45>~~Psalm 106:15. He was a fool who, when his barns were full, said, *Soul, take thine ease*.

III. A fool may have as much worldly wealth, and may enjoy as much of the pleasure of it, as a wise man; nay, and perhaps not be so sensible of the vexation of it: *What has the wise more than the fool?* v. 8. Perhaps he has

not so good an estate, so good a trade, nor such good preferment as the fool has. Nay, suppose them to be equal in their possessions, what can a wise man, a scholar, a wit, a politician, squeeze out of his estate more than needful supplies? and a half-witted man may do this. A fool can fare as well and relish it, can dress as well, and make as good a figure in any public appearance, as a wise man; so that if there were not pleasures and honour peculiar to the mind, which *the wise man has more than the fool*, as to this world they would be upon a level.

IV. Even a poor man, who has business, and is discreet, diligent, and dexterous, in the management of it, may get as comfortably through this world as he that is loaded with an overgrown estate. Consider *what the poor has* less than the rich, if he but *knows to walk before the living*, knows how to conduct himself decently, and do his duty to all, how to get an honest livelihood by his labour, how to spend his time well and improve his opportunities. *What has he?* Why, he is better beloved and more respected among his neighbours, and has a better interest than many a rich man that is griping and haughty. *What has he?* Why he has as much of the comfort of this life, has *food and raiment*, and is *therewith content*, and so is as truly rich as he that has abundance.

V. The enjoyment of what we have cannot but be acknowledged more rational than a greedy grasping at more (v. 9): *Better is the sight of the eyes*, making the best of that which is present, *than the wandering of the desire*, the uneasy walking of the soul after things at a distance, and the affecting of a variety of imaginary satisfactions. He is much happier that is always content, though he has ever so little, than he that is always coveting, though he has ever so much. We cannot say, *Better is the sight of the eyes than the fixing of the desire* upon God, and the resting of the soul in him; it is better to live by faith in things to come than to live by sense, which dwells only upon present things; but *better is the sight of the eyes than the roving of the desire* after the world, and the things of it, than which nothing is more uncertain nor more unsatisfying at the best. *This wandering of the desire is vanity and vexation of spirit*. It is *vanity* at the best; if what is desired, be obtained, it proves not what we promised ourselves from it, but commonly *the wandering desire* is crossed and disappointed, and then it turns to *vexation of spirit*.

VI. Our lot, whatever it is, is that which is appointed us by the counsel of God, which cannot be altered, and it is therefore our wisdom to reconcile

ourselves to it and cheerfully to acquiesce in it (v. 10): *That which has been*, or (as some read it) *that which is*, and so likewise that which shall be, *is named already*; it is already determined in the divine foreknowledge, and all our care and pains cannot make it otherwise than as it is fixed. *Jacta est alea — The die is cast*. It is therefore folly to quarrel with that which will be as it is, and wisdom to make a virtue of necessity. We shall have what pleases God, and let that please us.

VII. Whatever we attain to in this world, still we are but men, and the greatest possessions and preferments cannot set us above the common accidents of human life: *That which has been*, and is, that busy animal that makes such a stir and such a noise in the world, *is named already*. He that made him gave him his name, *and it is known that it is man*; that is his name by which he must know himself, and it is a humbling name, <GEN>Genesis 5:2. He *called their name Adam*; and all theirs have the same character, *red earth*. Though a man could make himself master of all the treasures of kings and provinces, yet he is a man still, mean, mutable, and mortal, and may at any time be involved in the calamities that are *common to men*. It is good for rich and great men to know and consider that they are *but men*, <PSA>Psalm 9:20. *It is known that they are but men*; let them put what face they will upon it, and, like the king of Tyre, *set their heart as the heart of God*, yet the Egyptians are men, and not gods, and it is known that they are so.

VIII. How far soever our desires wander, and how closely soever our endeavours keep pace with them, we cannot strive with the divine Providence, but must submit to the disposals of it, whether we will or no. *If it is man, he may not contend with him that is mightier than he*. It is presumption to arraign God's proceedings, and to charge him with folly or iniquity; nor is it to any purpose to complain of him, for *he is in one mind and who can turn him?* Elihu pacifies Job with this incontestable principle, *That God is greater than man* (<JOB>Job 33:12) and therefore *man may not contend with him*, nor resist his judgments, when they come with commission. A man cannot with the greatest riches make his part good against the arrests of sickness or death, but must yield to his fate.

ECCLESIASTES 6:11-12

THE INSATIABLENESS OF DESIRE

Here,

1. Solomon lays down his conclusion which he had undertaken to prove, as that which was fully confirmed by the foregoing discourse: *There be many things that increase vanity*; the life of man is vain, at the best, and there are abundance of accidents that concur to make it more so; even that which pretends to increase the vanity and make it more vexatious.

2. He draws some inferences from it, which serve further to evince the truth of it.

(1.) That a man is never the nearer to true happiness for the abundance that he has in this world: *What is man the better* for his wealth and pleasure, his honour and preferment? What remains to man? What residuum has he, what overplus, what real advantage, when he comes to balance his accounts? Nothing that will do him any good or turn to account.

(2.) That we do not know what to wish for, because that which we promise ourselves most satisfaction in often proves most vexatious to us: *Who knows what is good for a man in this life*, where every thing is vanity, and any thing, even that which we most covet, may prove a calamity to us? Thoughtful people are in care to do every thing for the best, if they knew it; but as it is an instance of the corruption of our hearts that we are apt to desire that as good for us which is really hurtful, as children that cry for knives to cut their fingers with, so is it an instance of the vanity of this world that what, according to all probable conjectures, seems to be for the best, often proves otherwise; such is our shortsightedness concerning the issues and events of things, and such broken reeds are all our creature-confidences. We know not how to advise others for the best, nor how to act ourselves, because that which we apprehend likely to be for our welfare may become a trap.

(3.) That therefore our life upon earth is what we have no reason to take any great complacency in, or to be confident of the continuance of. It is to be reckoned by *days*; it is but a *vain life*, and we spend it *as a shadow*, so little is there in it substantial, so fleeting, so uncertain, so transitory is it,

and so little in it to be fond of or to be depended on. If all the comforts of life be vanity, life itself can have no great reality in it to constitute a happiness for us.

(4.) That our expectations from this world are as uncertain and deceitful as our enjoyments are. Since every thing is vanity, *Who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?* He can no more please himself with the hopes of *what shall be after him*, to his children and family, than with the relish of what is with him, since he can neither foresee himself, nor can any one else foretel to him, *what shall be after him*. Nor shall he have any intelligence sent him of it when he is gone. *His sons come to honour, and he knows it not*. So that, look which way we will, *Vanity of vanity, all is vanity*.