

Ecclesiastes Chapter Six

Success Frustrated (vv. 1-7)

VERSE 1 There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent

among men (יש רעה אשר ראיתי תחת השמש ורבה היא על האדם) [*part. yesh*

there exists + *adj.f.s.abs. ra-ah evil*; *here tragedy* + *rel.pro. asher* + *Qal perf.1s. ra-ah see*;

observe + *part. tachath under* + *d.a.w/noun both s.abs. shemesh sun* + *waw w/adj.f.s.abs. rabh*

great; “prevalent” or “common” + *pro.3m.s. hu it* + *prep al above*; “among” + *d.a.w/noun*

m.s.abs. adam man] –

VERSE 2 a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his

soul lacks nothing of all that he desires (ואיננו חסר לנפשו מכל אשר יתאווה)

איש אשר יתן-לו האלהים עשר ונכסים וכבוד [noun m.s.abs. ish man; person + rel.pro.

asher + *Qal impf.3m.s. nathan give* + *prep lamed w/3m.s.suff.* + *d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim* +

noun m.s.abs. osher riches + *waw w/noun m.p.abs. nekes wealth* + *waw w/noun m.s.abs. kabod*

glory; honor + *waw w/adv. ayin nothing* + *adj.m.s.abs. chaser lacking* + *prep lamed w/noun*

f.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. nephesh soul + *prep min w/noun m.s.abs. kol all* + *rel.pro. asher* +

Hithpael impf.3m.s. aah desire];

yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them [זֶה]

וְלֹא־יִשְׁלִיטֵנוּ הָאֱלֹהִים לֵאכֹל מִמֶּנּוּ כִּי אִישׁ נָכְרִי יֵאכְלֵנוּ [waw w/neg lo + Hiphil

impf.3m.s.w/3m.s.suff. shalat exercise power + d.a.w/noun m.p.abs. Elohim + prep lamed w/Qal
infin.constr. akal eat + prep min w/3m.p.suff. “from them” + part. ki because, for + adj.m.s.abs.
nekat that which is foreign + Qal impf.3m.s.w/3m.s.suff. akal eat; “enjoys” + adj.m.s.abs. zeh
this; “them”]).

This is vanity and a severe affliction (הֵבֶל וְחֵלִי רָע הוּא) [noun m.s.abs. hebel vanity +

waw w/noun m.s.abs. cheli sickness; “affliction” + adj.m.s.abs. ra evil; “severe” + pro.3m.s. hu
“This”]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 1-2

1. A survey of all the passages in which Qohelet speaks of *pleasure* reveals that while Qohelet commends it for those who can find it, that it has no ultimate meaning, no profit (*yitron*), and so it is ultimately meaningless (*hebel*).
2. Qohelet with his characteristic use of *there is* (particle *yes* cf. 1:10, 2:13, 21; 4:8, 9; 6:1, 11; 7:15; 8:6, 14; 9:3; 10:5), introduces another anecdote.
3. He characterizes the situation that follows in verse 2 (and following) as *evil* (v. 1a).
4. As typical he presents his conclusion, with an air of detachment (*I have observed*).
5. Before naming *the evil*, Qohelet states that occurs frequently *among humans* (v. 2b).
6. The idea is that this *evil* weighs heavily upon humanity.
7. The anecdote is this: there are people who have it all—money, material blessings, power—who are not permitted to enjoy their good fortune due to events out of their control.
8. The reason: God does not let them enjoy their prosperity, while others do not even know how to enjoy it (rich miser).
9. Most people do not even have wealth and power, and they live on the fantasy that having it would result in satisfaction and contentment.
10. There is no question concerning Qohelet’s attitude toward this situation, since he labels it as “evil” in v. 1 and as a “severe affliction” (v. 2b).
11. The situation given here is reverse situation to what he presented in 5:19.
12. God gives some people “wealth and possessions” and “allows them to eat of it.”
13. In verse 2 Qohelet has in mind those to whom God has given these same gifts, even adding *honor* (paralleling the list in 2 Chron. 1:11), but here *God does not allow them to eat of it*.
14. God permits an individual to achieve “riches, wealth, and honor” but negates the long-term enjoyment of these things (“yet God has not permitted him to eat [enjoy] from them.”).
15. God who is sovereign over the affairs of mankind, grants riches, removes riches, and transfers riches.
16. All this is “vanity and a severe affliction” for those who reject the directive will of God for their lives.

Long Life & Many Children Frustrated (vv. 3-6)

VERSE 3 If a man fathers a hundred *children* and lives many years, however

many they be (אִישׁ מֵאָה וְשָׁנִים רַבּוֹת יַחְיֶה וְרַב שְׂיֵהִי יְמֵי־שָׁנָיו) [*part im if*

+ *Hiphil impf.3m.s. yalad bear; “fathers”* + *noun m.s.abs. ish man* + *adj.f.s.abs. me-ah hundred*

+ *waw w/noun f.p.abs. shanah year* + *adj.f.p.abs. rab many* + *Qal impf.3m.s. hayah be* +

rel.pro.prefix asher w/Qal impf.3m.s. hayah be], **but his soul is not satisfied with good**

things and he does not even have a proper burial, then I say, “Better the

miscarriage than he (מִן־הַטּוֹבָה וְגַם־קְבוּרָהּ לֹא־הִיְתָה לוֹ אִמְרָתִי טוֹב מִמָּוֶה הַנֶּפֶל) [*waw w/noun f.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff nephesh soul* + *neg lo* + *Qal impf.3f.s.*

sabea be satisfied + *prep min w/d.a.w/noun f.s.abs. tob good* + *waw w/conj. gam also; “even”* +

noun f.s.abs. qeburah burial + *neg lo* + *Qal perf.3f.s. hayah* + *prep lamed w/3m.s.suff.* + *Qal*

perf.1s. amar say + *adj.m.s.abs. tob “better”* + *prep min w/3m.s.suff.* + *d.a.w/noun m.s.abs.*

nephel miscarriage]),

VERSE 4 for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered

in obscurity (כִּי־בְהֶבֶל בָּא וּבְחֹשֶׁךְ יֵלֵךְ וּבְחֹשֶׁךְ שָׁמוּ יִכָּסֶה) [*part ki for* + *d.a.w/prep*

beth w/noun m.s.abs. chebel + *Qal perf.3m.s. bo come* + *waw/w/d.a.w/prep beth w/noun m.s.abs.*

choshek darkness; “into obscurity” + *Qal impf.3m.s. halak go* + *waw w/d.a.w/prep beth w/noun*

m.s.abs. choshek darkness + *noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. shem name* + *Pual impf.3m.s. kasah*

cover]).

VERSE 5 "It never sees the sun and it never knows *anything*; it is better off than

he (הַיָּמִים לֹא יִרְאֶה אֶת-הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ וְלֹא יִדְעַתְּ נַחַת לְזֶה מִזֶּה) [conj gam also + noun both s.abs. shemesh + neg lo + Qal perf.3m.s. ra-ah see + waw w/neg lo + Qal perf.3m.s. yada know + noun f.s.abs. nachath rest + prep lamed w/adj.m.s.abs. zeh it + prep min w/adj.m.s.abs. zeh "than he"]).

VERSE 6 "Even if the *other* man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy

good things -- do not all go to one place (וְאִם-יִחְיֶה אִישׁ אֶלֶף-שָׁנָה וְלֹא יִשְׂמְחֶה וְלֹא יִשְׂמְחֶה אֶלֶף-שָׁנָה וְלֹא יִשְׂמְחֶה) [waw w/part illu if, though + Qal perf.3m.s. hayah live + adj.m.s.ab.s eleph thousand + noun f.p.abs. shanah year + noun f. dual abs. pa-am step; "twice" + waw w/noun f.s.abs. tob goo + neg lo + Qal perf.3m.s. ra-ah see; "enjoy" + interrog.part.w/neg lo + prep al + noun m.s.abs. makom place + adj.m.s.abs.echad one + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs.kol all + Qal part.m.s.abs.halak walk; go])?"

ANALYSIS: VERSES 3-6

1. Verses 3-5 continue this theme of the person who has the resources to enjoy life to the fullest but cannot do so because God does not allow it (He has His reasons).
2. In verse 3, however, it is not the abundance of riches that are highlighted but the joys of children and a long life.
3. From the biblical perspective of a life dedicated to honoring God, children and a long life are a divine blessing (cf. Ps. 127:4; Prov. 3:2; both written by Solomon!).
4. But here, he envisages the situation where a person has abundant offspring, and lives a long life, but is still absolutely miserable.
5. This person's life is so filled with turmoil and misery that when his life does come to an end, he does not even have a proper burial.
6. In other words, his dead body is treated in a horrid fashion (Deut. 28:26; 2 Kgs. 9:10; Jer. 14:16).
7. For such a person Qohelet adds a sort of epithet: "Better the miscarriage than he!"
8. In verses 4 & 5 Qohelet expands upon the description of the stillborn.
9. The situation exists momentarily ("it comes to futility and goes to obscurity"), but it (stillborn) has no identity ("and its name covered in obscurity").
10. Here the advantage goes to the stillborn's fate versus the man who is not permitted to enjoy temporal blessings.
11. In verse 5 Qohelet continues his description of the advantages of the stillborn over the miserable rich.
12. This verse augments the previous one with its emphasis on darkness.

13. The darkness results from the fact that the stillborn never saw the sun.
14. What this means is clarified by *did not know*.
15. We expect a direct object after *know*, but the verb occurs elsewhere without a direct object with the meaning “have knowledge” (Isa. 44:9; 45:20).
16. Qohelet points out the obvious, that the stillborn never reaches consciousness, with the implication that the stillborn never experiences hardships, unlike those who struggle continuously.
17. Earlier Qohelet (v. 3) had used hyperbole (exaggeration) in reference to the blessing of a hundred children.
18. He also mentioned long life.
19. Here in verse 6 he really exploits hyperbole, hypothesizing about someone who lives two thousand years.
20. Though someone lives to this incredibly old age (more than twice the age of Methuselah!), these years are still meaningless if he is unable to enjoy them.
21. And in any case, though two thousand years is a long time, even that life comes to a close.
22. Death again spoils the enjoyment of life however long.
23. This is the fate of all those who enjoy or do not enjoy life who have no hope.

More Reasons to Question the Pursuit of Wealth (vv. 7-9)

VERSE 7 **All a man's labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied**

כָּל־עֵמֶל הָאָדָם לְפִיהוּ וְגַם־הַנֶּפֶשׁ לֹא תִמְלֵא

[*noun m.s.constr. kol all + noun m.s.constr.*

amal labor + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. adam man + prep lamed w/noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. peh

mouth + waw w/conj gam yet + d.a.w/noun f.s.abs. nephesh soul; “appetite” + neg lo + Niphal

impf.3m.s. male be full; “satisfied”]).

VERSE 8 **For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool (מֶן־הַכְּסִיל)**

כִּי מֶה־יֹּתֵר לְחָכָם

[*part ki + interrog. mah what? + noun m.s.abs. yitron advantage + prep*

lamed w/d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. chakam wise + interrog. mah what? + d.a.w/noun m.s.abs. kesil

fool])?

What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living

מִה־לָּעֲנִי יוֹדַע לְהֵלֵךְ נֶגֶד הַחַיִּים/ מִה־לָּעֲנִי יוֹדַע לְהֵלֵךְ נֶגֶד הַחַיִּים [interrog. mah

what? + prep lamed w/d.a.w/adj.m.s.abs. ani afflicted, oppressed, poor + Qal part.m.s.abs. yada

know + prep lamed w/Qal infin.constr. halak walk + part. neged before + d.a/w/adj.m.p.abs.

chay living)]?

VERSE 9 What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires (עֵינַיִם מִהֶלֶךְ-נֶפֶשׁ)

טוֹב מִרְאֵה [adj.m.s.abs. tob good; “better” + noun m.s.constr. mar-eh sight + noun f. dual

abs. ayin eye + prep min w/Qal infin.constr. halak; “desires” + noun f.s.abs. nepesh soul]).

This too is futility and a striving after wind (גַּם־זֶה הֶבֶל וְרֵעוּת רֵיחַ) [conj gam “too”

+ adj.m.s.abs. zeh this + noun m.s.abs. hebel vanity + waw w/noun f.s.constr. re-uth striving +

noun both s.abs. ruach wind]).

ANALYSIS: VERSES 7-9

1. The theme of seeking meaning and satisfaction through material wealth continues in these verses.
2. Verse 7 presents another reason against this quest.
3. “All a man’s labor is for his mouth” refers to man’s most basic need---food (see Prov. 16:26 for a similar idea).
4. The last half of this verse reads: “and yet the soul (*nepesh*) is not satisfied.”
5. The idea is that the search for contentment is never ending.
6. While Qohelet recommends the pleasures associated with toiling, and eating, and drinking, as the best life has to offer, these things cannot attain to that which is ‘other-worldly.’
7. In verse 8a the question of the advantages of wise person over the fool is addressed.
8. If wealth comes by wisdom (cosmic), and wealth has no permanent value, then this casts wisdom into doubt.
9. The wise man has no ultimate advantage over the fool, because death (noted earlier) overcomes both of them.
10. What are we to make of the second line (v. 8b)?
11. “What *advantage* does the poor man have?” is answered as: “knowing how to walk before the living.”
12. If the poor man knows how to walk (conduct himself) before the living, he is one who has found the wisdom that overcomes the futility of human life to find real meaning, purpose, and definition.

13. Verse 9a is a ‘better-than’ proverb.
14. The general idea of this proverb is that what is present in hand (e.g., “what the eye sees”) is better than what one desires and does not have.
15. This parallels the proverb: “A bird in hand is better than two in the bush.”
16. Enjoy what one has whether little or much is the best wisdom one can offer to those who live solely for the temporal realm.
17. The concluding and frequent saying (“This too is futility and chasing after the wind”) is ambiguous.
18. Does it refer to only to the second part of the proverb or the entire proverb?
19. It could even characterize the whole section (5:1-6:9).
20. Desire, even desire attained cannot provide perfect satisfaction, and so is characterized by the formula: “this too is futility and chasing after the wind.”
21. This is the final occurrence of this formula in its full form.

The Future—Determined and Unknown (vv. 10-12)

VERSE 10 **Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is**

מִה־שֶׁהָיָה כְּבָר נִקְרָא שְׁמוֹ וְנֹדַע אֲשֶׁר־הוּא אָדָם [interrog. mah what + rel.pro.prefix

w/Qal perf.3m.s. hayah “exists” + adv kebar already + Niphal perf.3m.s. qara call; “been

named” + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s. shem name + waw w/Niphal part.m.s.abs. yada know +

rel.pro. asher + pro.3m.s. hu it + noun m.s.abs. adam man]; **for he cannot dispute with**

him who is stronger than he is [waw w/neg lo + Qal impf.3m.s. yakol be able + prep lamed

w/Qal infin.constr. din contend, judge; “dispute” + prep im with + rel.pro.prefix asher

w/adj.m.s.abs. tappiq mighty: “stronger” + prep min w/3m.s.suff. “than he”]).

VERSE 11 **For there are many words which increase futility** (תְּרַבֶּה מְרִבִּים הֶבֶל)

כִּי יִשְׁדָּבְרִים [part ki for + part. yesh “there are” + noun m.p.abs. dabar word + Hiphil

infin.constr. rabah “many” + Hiphil part.m.p.abs. rabah “increase” + noun m.s.abs. hebel

“futility”]).

What *then* is the advantage to a man (מִה־יִתֵּר לְאָדָם) [interrog. mah what? + noun m.s.abs. yother advantage + prep. lamed w/non m.s.abs. adam]]?)

VERSE 12 For who knows what is good for a man during *his* lifetime (בְּחַיִּים)

כִּי מִי־יֹדַע מַה־טוֹב לְאָדָם [part ki for + interrog. mi who? + Qal part.m.s.abs. yada know + interrog mah what + adj.m.s.abs. tob good + d.a.w/prep lamed w/noun m.s.abs. adam man + d.a.w/prep. beth w/noun m.p.abs. chayim lifetime], **during the few years of his futile life** [מִסְפָּר יְמֵי־חַיֵּי הַבָּלוּ] [noun m.s.constr. miser number + noun m.p.constr. yom day, year + noun m.p.constr. chayim life + noun m.s.constr.w/3m.s.suff. hebel “futile”]]?)

He will spend them like a shadow (וַיַּעֲשֶׂם כְּצֶלֶל) [waw w/Qal impf.3m.s.w/3m.p.suff. ashah do; “will spend” + prep kaph w/noun m.s.abs. tsel shadow]].

For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun (אֲחֵרָיו תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ)

אֲשֶׁר מִי־יֹגִיד לְאָדָם מַה־יְהִיָּה [rel.pro. asher + interrog. mi who? + Hiphil impf.3m.s. nagad tell + d.a.w/prepl lamed w/noun m.s.abs. adam + interrog. mah what? + Qal impf.3m.s. hayah be + adv. achar after + part. tachath under + d.a.w/noun both s.abs. shemesh]]?)

ANALYSIS: VERSES 10-12

1. This short section marks the middle of the book according to Masoretic marginal notation.
2. This also marks a transition in Qohelet’s focus.
3. He leaves behind his explicit search for meaning and in the second half of the book he focuses on advice and commentary about the future.
4. Verse 10 picks up the thought “that there is nothing new under the sun.”
5. Here he presents a new twist by saying that everything has been previously named.
6. To name something captures the essential nature of an entity.
7. His comment is that everything that takes place has previously been known.
8. The second clause—“and it is known what man is”—is debated.
9. An alternate translation: “Whatever happens has already been named. Also it is known that they are human, so no person may argue with one stronger than he is.”

10. That second clause refers to human limitations and this seems to be the case in light of the third and final clause.
11. Humans are finite and relatively weak.
12. The final clause speaks indirectly of God as someone “who is stronger than [man].”
13. The first part of verse 10 leaves unstated who the “namer” and “knower” is.
14. Now we find out that it is God, whose knowledge reigns supreme over humans.
15. Therefore, the uselessness of argumentation, when He assigns them their fate, which they may not like.
16. Verse 10 indicates that it is futile to argue with someone, presumably God, who is stronger than mere humans, with all their limitations.
17. Verse 11 draws the implication that a multiplication of words is a waste of energy (“futility”).
18. There is no benefit for humans to say a lot (Job 40:2 “Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.”).
19. This verse closes with a question which requires the answer: “None.”
20. Verse 12 resorts to rhetorical questions to express his view of life that it has no ultimate meaning.
21. The “good” here refers to absolute good.
22. “Who knows what is good for a person in his lifetime” is God and anyone who possesses His wisdom.
23. People think they know what the good life is and pursue it the best they can.
24. This is relative good versus ultimate good.
25. Another problem for humans is that they have a limited lifespan in which to find the kind of good that doesn’t fall under the vanity of vanity rubric.
26. “He will spend his life like a shadow” adds to the idea of a transitory existence, that has no ultimate meaning.
27. After all, a shadow is just a reflection of something that is real.
28. This metaphor adds to the notion of that which is ephemeral.
29. The verse begins and ends with a rhetorical question.
30. This second question has to do with knowing the future.
31. Man cannot accurately predict the future while they live much less after they leave the scene.
32. This rather depressing portrait of humanity is nevertheless spot on as it looks at the human race living out their vain lives apart from God’s word and will.

END: Ecclesiastes Chapter Six
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Jack M. Ballinger