

# Low On Life

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12    October 2, 2024

*"I suppose it've been better if I'd never been born at all."* That was George Bailey's conclusion at the pivotal moment in *It's A Wonderful Life*. He was so despondent he was ready to jump off a bridge. But, after being distracted from his suicide, he goes on to see why his life was worth living.

If the Teacher of Ecclesiastes had been there instead of George Bailey, the movie might have had a very different ending. At least if we were dealing with the Teacher of chapter 6 - one of the darkest in all the Bible.<sup>1</sup>

Clarence the angel might have said, "What about your family? What about all the great achievements of your life?" In *this* chapter, the Teacher would respond, "Yeah, what about them? I'm still unhappy and I have no guarantee for happiness or peace of mind in the future. From my vantage point, life isn't worth living."

What makes life worth living? How can we find happiness in life? That's what America was all about from the beginning, right? "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?" The *Wall Street Journal* once said, "We may have life and liberty. But the pursuit of happiness isn't going so well."<sup>2</sup>

This passage brings us to the end of the first half of the book. For a few weeks, the Teacher seemed like he was finally figuring things out. Tonight it's going to feel like he has regressed into that depressed obsessive he was a few chapters ago. And that's because he *has*. Remember: this whole book is the travel journal of a man on a quest for satisfaction - a quest for meaning - a quest for ultimate happiness and well-being. In the last few sections, he took a quick detour to share with us a discovery or two he had made. But now he's got to get back out into the field. Back on the hunt. These questions gnaw at him and each day they remain unanswered, he feels like his life is wasted.

As we read his travel journal, we will discover (as one commentator says), "[*The Teacher*] is left with no absolute values to live for; not even any practical certainties to plan for."<sup>3</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 6:1 - Here is a tragedy I have observed under the sun, and it weighs heavily on humanity:**

When reading Ecclesiastes, always remember what "under the sun" is the scope of the Teacher's research. He means life on earth, disconnected from a personal relationship with God. He's speaking from a secular humanist perspective.<sup>4</sup> And that's why he can't find what he's looking for.

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Ryken *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Clements *No Satisfaction: Why What You Have Is Never Enough*

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner *A Time To Mourn & A Time To Dance*

<sup>4</sup> Kidner

In his travels, the Teacher discovered a tragedy - a terrible sickness. Something evil. Something that is happening all the time.<sup>5</sup> What is it?

**Ecclesiastes 6:2 - <sup>2</sup>God gives a person riches, wealth, and honor so that he lacks nothing of all he desires for himself, but God does not allow him to enjoy them. Instead, a stranger will enjoy them. This is futile and a sickening tragedy.**

That's the tragedy? That rich people are unhappy? It's more than that. It's what that reveals about our world. You see, this person with riches and wealth and honor possesses *all the things* the world has to offer. *But* having them is not the same as *enjoying* them.

Remember what we learned back in chapter 2: We can't enjoy life apart from God. And that's *exactly* what the Teacher and the people he's describing in our text tonight are trying to do.

If you list the overall wealth of all nations of the world, the United States sits at the top. Per capita we're still 3rd place out of 195.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile we have the highest suicide rate of all wealthy nations.<sup>7</sup>

Now, is the Teacher saying that every rich person is depressed and suicidal? No. He's speaking generally. But, we all know the feeling of finally getting some *thing* we wanted so bad - something we pined for and stared at and obsessed over. And then we finally get it on Christmas morning or when we've finally saved up enough. And, maybe a year later, maybe a few hours later, we find our heart is no longer thumping for that thing anymore. The *thing* doesn't bring satisfaction.

When a man in the crowd wanted Jesus to decide an inheritance dispute, Jesus said, "Friend... one's life is not in the abundance of his possessions."<sup>8</sup> It's the wrong focus. It's the wrong answer.

Notice the wording: this fellow in verse 2 lacks *nothing* he could possibly want...*for himself*. He is looking for *personal* pleasure. It's all about him and his feelings and his wants. They want to always feel the feelings of happiness, never bothered or inconvenienced by life, never encumbered by *your* needs because, after all, theirs are the ones that matter. But he's left totally unsatisfied.

The Teacher blames this problem on God. "God does not *allow* him to enjoy these things." But why *should* God allow it? God owes us absolutely nothing but wrath and judgment. Why *should* God participate with this person's selfish enslavement to a temporal way of life? When Adam sinned, God said, "We can't let him eat of the tree of life and stay in this position. We can't *allow* that."

**Ecclesiastes 6:3-4 - <sup>3</sup>A man may father a hundred children and live many years. No matter how long he lives, if he is not satisfied by good things and does not even have a proper burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. <sup>4</sup>For he comes in futility and he goes in darkness, and his name is shrouded in darkness.**

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<sup>5</sup> Ryken

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2024/03/14/which-countries-are-really-the-richest-infographic/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/press-release/2020/new-international-report-health-care-us-suicide-rate-highest-among-wealthy>

<sup>8</sup> Luke 12:15

In the culture of the time, a successful life was measured by if you were wealthy, had a large family, and lived to an old age.<sup>9</sup> The Teacher uses extremes: Fabulous wealth. 100 kids. Fantastically long life. His point is: Money can't buy you love. And having 100 kids doesn't guarantee that this person won't be hated and left unclaimed at the morgue one day. Life is about more than numbers.

"But I did the thing. I had the kids. I attained what the world said was the goal. So where's the promise of relational fulfillment and family honor and a monument to my greatness after I die?"

Well, one problem is that he was *still* worried about himself more than others. "If *he* is not satisfied by good things..." His pursuit is *self*-satisfaction based on worldly acquisitions.

It's at this point that the Teacher has his George Bailey moment: It would've been better if I'd never been born.

**Ecclesiastes 6:5 - <sup>5</sup> Though a stillborn child does not see the sun and is not conscious, it has more rest than he.**

He wants *rest*. To be at peace. To have a heart that is untroubled. But we live in a difficult, troubled world, and the Teacher can't escape it. So he envies the child who dies before birth.

Is the Bible saying that it's better to be stillborn? Well, again, consider the scope of this study. The Teacher is *not* speaking as a Believer. He's not considering eternity. As far as he's concerned, life ends in the grave. He is not talking about what happens to human souls after death.<sup>10</sup>

From this vantage point, he's saying, "Well if you can do all the 'right' things and work yourself to the bone only to have all your riches taken and your family relationships broken, and you end up with some debilitating disease that kills you with terrible suffering, what's the point?" In *that* case - if that's all there is to life - it would be much easier to be the stillborn baby.

With that said, note that Solomon considered this stillborn baby to be a person as much as the rich man with 100 children. Their *experience* was different but their *essence* was the same.

**Ecclesiastes 6:6 - <sup>6</sup> And if a person lives a thousand years twice, but does not experience happiness, do not both go to the same place?**

Let's say someone lives *twice* as long as the oldest person ever, death is *still* going to get them in the end. And living a long time doesn't guarantee a happy life. In fact, more often the longer you live the more opportunity you have to suffer under the sun.

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<sup>9</sup> Duane A. Garrett *The New American Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*

<sup>10</sup> *CSB Study Bible Notes*

The Teacher doesn't want to die, but he also doesn't see what the point of living is. It's very sad. So, after failing at finding satisfaction in the big three pursuits - wealth, large family, long life - he turns to smaller pursuits. How about day-to-day things like really killing it at work and getting run-of-the-mill satisfactions that make the body feel good, or becoming the smartest guy in the room?

**Ecclesiastes 6:7 - <sup>7</sup>All of a person's labor is for his stomach, yet the appetite is never satisfied.**

Focusing on day-to-day pleasure didn't fare any better than his whole-life plans. The poor Teacher is going the wrong way. Your stomach will always become hungry again. Your eyes will never finish seeing. The urge you satisfy for today will return tomorrow, demanding more. This is what ethicists call the hedonistic paradox. "The more people pursue pleasure, the more elusive the goal becomes."<sup>11</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 6:8 - <sup>8</sup>What advantage then does the wise person have over the fool? What advantage is there for the poor person who knows how to conduct himself before others?**

Whether it's wealth, fame, intellect, or experiences, satisfaction is sold separately. The wisdom of this world cannot bring peace to your heart because there is *eternity* in your heart. You can't scratch that itch with anything the world has to offer.

And so, the Teacher turns from one pursuit to another, each time left more frustrated than before. Michael Eaton writes, "*The Teacher is slamming every door except the door of faith.*"<sup>12</sup>

**Ecclesiastes 6:9 - <sup>9</sup>Better what the eyes see than wandering desire. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.**

The New Living Translation helps clear up this verse:

**Ecclesiastes 6:9 (NLT) - <sup>9</sup>Enjoy what you have rather than desiring what you don't have. Just dreaming about nice things is meaningless—like chasing the wind.**

Some dreams need to be left behind. We've got to give up chasing the wind. Instead of cultivating desire for what we *don't* have, we should cultivate thankfulness for what we *do* have. Remember: Godliness with contentment is *great gain*.<sup>13</sup> That's what the Teacher is after, right? Profit. Advantage. *Lasting* abundance in the heart? God says, "Here's how to have it." When we walk with God, He gives us life more abundantly in the now *and* the not yet. He gives joy for the temporal and regenerates us with the eternal.

Verse 9 is the close of the first half of the book. Verses 10 through 12 help us bridge to the second half. As we toward part 2, we see the Teacher is still pretty pessimistic.

<sup>11</sup> James Smith *The Wisdom Literature And Psalms*

<sup>12</sup> Michael Eaton *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction And Commentary*

<sup>13</sup> 1 Timothy 6:6

**Ecclesiastes 6:10 - <sup>10</sup> Whatever exists was given its name long ago, and it is known what mankind is. But he is not able to contend with the one stronger than he.**

The Teacher spent this chapter complaining. He's offended that he can't find happiness for himself. But he's wise enough to realize that it will do no good arguing these complaints with God. Job had complaints for God and, for a while said, "I'd like to talk to God about this stuff and prove that my complaint is just!" If he and the Teacher were talking, the Teacher would say, "Yeah, that's not an argument you can win."

But scholars also point out that, in this verse, the Teacher is making specific references to Adam in the opening chapters of Genesis.<sup>14</sup> The problems of life, of fulfillment, of peace and rest in the heart, are nothing new. They have existed since the fall of man. It is a result of sin and the broken relationship between God and man.

Duane Garrett writes, "*No sage, however brilliant or daring, has substantially added to Adam's discovery...Adam has already shown us what we are.*"<sup>15</sup>

If we want to know why things are the way they are - why people have such struggles and difficulty in life, look to the word of God that lays it all out *and* lays out the path of escape. The Bible shows what mankind is. That we are mistake-makers. That we are easily distracted and deceived. That when the chips are down, we'd rather help ourselves than others. That we need to be *rescued* from ourselves and from this fallen world under the sun.

**Ecclesiastes 6:11 - <sup>11</sup> For when there are many words, they increase futility. What is the advantage for mankind?**

The Teacher wants out. The more he finds, the less he likes what he finds.

**Ecclesiastes 6:12 - <sup>12</sup> For who knows what is good for anyone in life, in the few days of his futile life that he spends like a shadow? Who can tell anyone what will happen after him under the sun?**

He asks a few rhetorical questions here, but they are questions that need answering. Where does *good* come from? What can make a life full of struggle, chance, futility, and ultimately death worth living? Can the world answer these questions and offer what I need? It claims it can.

But the Gospel tells us the truth. The world *can't* offer you a meaningful life. It *can't* offer you lasting peace. It can offer you wealth, but as we saw in an earlier passage and see through living examples all around us, wealth often destroys life. It can offer you temporal pleasures, but they will not satisfy.

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<sup>14</sup> NAC

<sup>15</sup> Garrett

*But*, God can give you what you really need. He alone can make life enjoyable, and can make life worth living. He can make your life more than worthwhile. He makes it *eternal*.

The Teacher was desperate for peace and rest. Here's what Jesus said:

**John 14:27 - 27 "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don't let your heart be troubled or fearful."**

Christ came that we might have what the Teacher is looking for. Purpose and meaning and enjoyment and contentment and joy. An abundant life worth living.

John put it very plainly:

**1 John 5:12 - 12 The one who has the Son has life. The one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.**

The Teacher leaves the first half of his book broken-hearted. In this terribly tragic moment, he looks on the stillborn child and realizes, "My whole *life* has been a miscarriage." But how could that happen? He was so rich. He was so smart. He was so successful. He was so important. He was so famous. He was so *everything*. But satisfaction is sold separately.<sup>16</sup>

He forgot what he himself said back in chapter 2. You can't have lasting purpose and you can't enjoy life *unless* you have a personal relationship with God, Who is the *Giver* of life and purpose and satisfaction and every good gift. You can't have joy unless you please Him.<sup>17</sup> How do we please God? Very simple: We please God by having faith in Him. By believing Him. Not just believing *in* Him, that He exists and maybe did some things in the past. The Teacher even had that level of belief. But by believing Him *now*, actively. Believing His prescriptions. Believing His directions. Believing He has a plan for our lives, and following Him to discover it.

A life of purpose, joy, satisfaction, and rest is ours to receive from the Lord, whether that includes material prosperity or not. Because material prosperity does not give us those things. The Lord does. And He is ready to give you temporal fulfillment and eternal purpose if you will believe Him, walk with Him, and be born again into this new life He's offering.

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<sup>16</sup> Ryken

<sup>17</sup> Ecclesiastes 2:24-26