

Learning the Hard Way or the Better Way

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 5

Ecclesiastes 5:13-20

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

Have you ever witnessed how money can take flight like a bird or that debt is easier to accumulate than savings? Have you ever experienced life as one of the case studies that Solomon refers to in *Ecclesiastes 5:13-20*? Solomon contrasts two ways of viewing money and the gifts God has blessed each one of us with. One case study illustrates a man handling his money and gifts with a selfish and insecure attitude. Whereas in the second case study, Solomon highlights a man with an outlook of acceptance and enjoyment toward what God has given him. Where do you fit into the spectrum?

Discussion Points:

The more you want, the less satisfied you will be with what you already have.

- Are you satisfied with what you already have or are you clutching what you have and battling for more?
- What tends to be the attitude and overall life outlook of a person who is unsatisfied with what they have?
- Do possessions make your life meaningful or is your life meaningful regardless of what you have?

In many ways the two case studies were similar, yet they hold contrasting goals and perspectives on life.

- Both of them had possessions, but the first case study's assets were guarded and hoarded, while the second case study's possessions were viewed as from the Lord. Which case study do you more closely relate to and why?
- In what ways do the case studies' views on work reflect yours? Do you see your job as meaningless toil and drudgery or as a meaningful assignment and blessing from God?
- How do you see your heart attitude toward life? Are you filled with regret or gratitude? Are you wallowing in the failure of the past or anticipating your future with the Lord?

Solomon notes that there are four gifts that God blesses us with – the gift of life, the gift of enjoying what you have, the gift of accepting where you are, and the gift of enjoying what you do.

- In what ways are you using these gifts from God?
- How are you enjoying what you already have or are you wishing you had more or something else?
- Why did you or why have you yet to surrender to His purposes in placing you right where you are in the job that you have? Are you just working hard and doing your job for God's glory where you've been assigned for now?

Discussion Guide Cont.

Gospel Connection:

Jesus Christ will be returning a second time to set up His kingdom. Believers should be cheering on the future and looking forward to His coming to collect His church! Knowing that we will spend eternity in heaven with Him should be a great comfort in the present days.

Practical Implications:

Think: How am I viewing the four gifts that God has blessed me with? Am I honoring God with them?

Pray: Praise God for His gracious gifts and thank Him for the blessings that you have.

Do: Redeem your gift cards. Make the most of them. Anticipate the day when redemption is finally complete and you are home in Heaven with Him.

Learning the Hard Way or the Better Way

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 5

Ecclesiastes 5:13-20

We are making our way through Solomon's private journal where he dots the entries with lessons learned; many of them the hard way. If we can learn from what he learned, we won't have to learn these lessons the hard way but can learn the right way. There are some lessons you don't want to learn by experience, but by obedience. Your mother told you not to touch that hot oven or you'll burn your hand. You can learn the truth of that lesson by obedience, or experience.

The word of God is filled with practical lessons that can be learned by obeying their truth or by striking out on our own and learning the hard way. Solomon has focused these past few entries on the subject of money and possessions. One of the lessons God has taught us through Solomon's own experience is that money is easier to spend than give away or save. In Proverbs, Solomon writes that money can sprout wings and fly away like an eagle (Proverbs 23:5).

A majority of devices now have fingerprint sensors on them for enhanced security, an innovation that came in handy for a clever little kindergartner I read about recently. When her mother took a nap, this little girl used her mother's thumbprint to unlock the phone and then went on a shopping spree. After the mother woke up, she saw 13 order confirmations from Amazon.com totaling \$250 dollars in all.ⁱ If you have young children, you might want to keep that in mind the next time you take a nap.

Money can take flight like a bird.

Another lesson learned over time is that debt is easier to accumulate than money. Solomon refers to money slipping through our fingers while added costs and responsibilities accumulate. In other words, the more you have, the more you will have to spend to take care of what you have. As John Stott once wrote,

"Remember Christian, we're pilgrims, not settlers . . . so we ought to travel light." Debt is easy to accumulate.ⁱⁱ

The president of World Vision wrote about an acquaintance from Rochester, New York whose three-year-old daughter received an application in the mail for a platinum Visa card in her name. Her mother thought, "This is crazy! I'm going to find out if it could happen." So she filled out the application. She listed her daughter's occupation as "toddler" and where it asked about annual income, she left it blank. Then she wrote on the application, "I'd like to have a credit card to buy some toys, but I'm only three, and my mommy said no." Two weeks later, the card arrived in the mail.

But the problem isn't just debt; Solomon has made it abundantly clear.

The more you want, the less satisfied you'll be with what you already have.

Now what Solomon is about to do is introduce us, by way of inspiration, to several more lessons we can either learn the hard way through experience or learn the better way through obedience. To highlight the difference, Solomon presents us with two case studies for observation in *Ecclesiastes chapter 5*. We will call the first case study:

Case study #1: *Selfishness and Insecurity*

Notice *verse 13*:

There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun; riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture (Ecclesiastes 5:13-14a).

It is as if Solomon says, “Let me tell you about something I’ve seen down here under the sun, down here during my lifetime, and I have to tell you that this literally turns my stomach.” This is a grievous evil.

The Hebrew word for *grievous* is sickening. In fact, the word is used to refer to someone who is sick of heart – someone who is about to become heartbroken.ⁱⁱⁱ And whose heart is about to be broken? A man who is described here as someone who *kept his riches*, or you could translate that as he *guarded his wealth*. He has been careful; he has children to inherit his hard-earned dollars. But then, for some reason we are not told, he invests in some bad business venture and loses everything. The Hebrew here for *bad venture* can be translated simply enough, bad business

The implication in this case study is that he could have kept his riches. He didn’t really need more, but he wanted to have more so he empties his bank account and gambles everything on a business deal that goes south, and he loses it all.

Here is the lesson:

If you risk what you have to get more than you need, you won’t enjoy what you have and you might lose what you need.

The description here is that this man has become self-centered and insecure even after he has become wealthy. He hasn’t enjoyed his riches. Solomon writes that he guarded his stuff – he held onto it. He clutched it. He wouldn’t share it. He hoarded it. He worried over it. He didn’t enjoy any of it, and you get the idea that his family was not able to enjoy any of it either.

But then an opportunity comes his way, and, for someone like him to buy in, it must have had just about a money-back-guarantee to make him more than he could ever need because he is already rich. So he goes all in.

And Solomon simply records in *verse 14*, **and those riches were lost.**

Gone.

How much did he lose? Solomon describes it in terms of being stripped down to nothing. Notice *verse 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. This is a grievous evil: (this is a gut-wrenching scene) ***just as he came, so shall he go, and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?*** (Ecclesiastes 5:15).

He was chasing more, and chasing more is like chasing the wind.

There is nothing unbiblical with getting involved in a business venture nor is there anything wrong with sacrificing to start some enterprise or what we refer to as selling the family farm to start a business. The case study here is of a man who was already rich but no longer enjoyed the riches; rather he clutched his riches and then gambled everything because he simply wanted more. He risked what he had in order to get more than he needed, and, in the meantime, he had stopped enjoying what he had and then he lost what he needed.

I came across a news article that highlights the irony of a man missing the value of what he had because all he could think about was getting more. A young man in Ottawa, Canada, robbed a bank. He held up a teller with his pistol and demanded all the cash she had. She emptied her till, and he ran out of the bank with \$6,000. He was later caught and sentenced to time in jail. But his pistol, which had been confiscated by law enforcement, was later auctioned to a museum. This young man’s Colt pistol was a rare antique made by the Ross Rifle Company in 1918, and it was worth \$100,000. He already had more than he needed. In fact, he risked getting more than he had without ever seeing the value of what he already possessed. Now that is learning a lesson the hard way.

Solomon ends this case study by telling us what happened to the greedy man who lost it all. Things don’t get better; notice *verse 17*:

Moreover, he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger
(Ecclesiastes 5:17).

- **Darkness** symbolizes his misery. You could translate it *obscurity*; he is isolated in his greedy misery.

- **Vexation** is a word that refers to frustration and mental anguish.

- **Sickness** is a Hebrew word that includes physical and mental digression – that mysterious mix of psychosomatic illnesses that just eat away at him.

- And listed last here is his **anger**, or his rage you could translate it. He is infuriated over his loss; he lashes out at everyone over his lost ambitions and his scheming.^{iv}

No wonder he is eating his meals alone - no one dares come near him. The truth is, he will never enjoy another meal. This man's ego was defined by what he possessed, and when it was all lost, he lost his total reason for being, for relating well with others, and for serving and loving others. Take everything away from someone and you will discover who they really are. Strip away their stuff and discover what they really care about.

I could not help but think of our Lord hanging on that cross stripped naked. He was going to die naked just as He was born naked, but even before He died, everything was taken away from Him. His dignity was stripped away. His loincloth is an artistic addition in paintings out of sensitivity for the viewer; Roman crucifixions were humiliating in every possible manner. He was taunted by the crowd; He was spit on and cursed; He owned nothing but the tunic the soldiers threw dice to get. He lost His closest friends who ran away in fear.

Yet look at how He acted; listen to what He said out of concern for his mother, giving her to John for safe-keeping. Listen to His prayer of intercession for the mob whom He asked His Father to forgive. Take note of his love and compassion for the criminal hanging next to Him. This criminal wanted something from

Jesus! When you are in your deepest need, having lost so much, the last thing you want to do is give someone what *they* need! But look at the perfect Man, the God-Man-Redeemer, whose reason for being had nothing to do with what He could get but what He could give, and through His sacrifice for your sins and mine, He made the way for you and me to live forever in Heaven.

There is every reason to believe this man here is Solomon's case study lost both earth and heaven, and that is the most heart-breaking tragedy of all. As believers, although we don't live for earth, we will one day inherit a new earth to enjoy in that Heavenly, eternal state (Matthew 5:5). C.S. Lewis put it well when he wrote, "Aim at Heaven and you get earth thrown in; aim at earth and you will get neither.

Case study #2: Acceptance and Enjoyment

Now *verse 18*.

Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting – (Ecclesiastes 5:18a).

Solomon presents case study #2 after he has observed a different kind of person. He writes, "Now would you look at this – ***this is good and fitting***." You could translate *fitting*, beautiful; in other words, now let me show you something good and beautiful, something attractive and something worth pursuing.^v

And what is it? Notice further:

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. 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 (Ecclesiastes 5:18b-19)

This is one of the most God-saturated entries in his journal, by the way. Four times Solomon

mentions gifts from God that we need to take note of – these are good and beautiful things!

- **The first gift is the ability to even be alive – v. 18**

Solomon writes in *verse 18 – eating and drinking and finding enjoyment in your toil under the sun for the few days of your life that God has given you.*

Your life is a gift from God. He created you and measured out your days, even if it is a few days; it is His gift to you. In fact, if He had not given you the gift of this life, you would never be able to enjoy the gift of eternal life. But because He gave you *this* life you will be able to enjoy eternal life, that is, if you have come to life by the gift of His faith in Jesus Christ alone. And if you exercised that gift of faith in Christ you are now related to God the Father – and just look at these gifts!

- **The second gift is the ability to enjoy what you have – v. 19a**

Did you catch that? This gift is not the ability to have things but the ability to enjoy the things you have. Solomon writes – *the power to enjoy them.*

These gifts are like Christmas gifts that you unwrap only to discover that batteries are sold separately. Your kid opens that new remote-controlled car and tears it out of the box only to find that it doesn't work because it needs 85 batteries – so you go scrounging around in the closet to find them. He's got the gift, but not the power to enjoy it. That's the idea here. Notice again in the first part of *verse 19a: everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and* – notice – *power to enjoy them.* That power comes separately. And Solomon knows because he learned this lesson the hard way. He has everything – he is worth 2.3 trillion dollars – remember? But he's been miserable, out of fellowship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He knows how boring a new possession can be; he knows how

tasteless a meal can be, even when eaten off a plate made of solid gold.

So what. So what.

Satisfaction is sold separately, so to speak.^{vi}

God gives believers and unbelievers the gift of life and food and possessions, but because of our joy in Him, He provides us the capacity and the power to enjoy what have.

- **The third gift is the ability to accept where you are – v. 19b**

In the middle part of *verse 19*, Solomon writes, *God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot.* The word for *lot* refers to allotment or placement; your assignment in life. This is another way of reminding us that we will never be able to muster up contentment. There are times when you will not be able to convince yourself that where you have been assigned in life is a gift – a good thing. No, accepting your lot is directly related to surrendering and trusting the goodness of God who is working everything out for your good and His purposes in conforming you into the image and likeness of His Son (*Romans 8:28-29*).

Not only is acceptance of your lot in life a gift of submission and surrender and trust in the Lord, Solomon adds another gift:

- **The fourth gift is the ability to enjoy what you do – v. 19c**

Solomon writes at the end of *verse 19: to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil* – his labor, his work. All of this is bundled up in what Solomon writes next – *this is the gift of God.* You will never really enjoy your job until you realize that it is a gift from God.

By the way, you can easily find a close comparison between these two case studies, these two categories of people. In many ways they were similar, but they hold very different goals and perspectives on life.

- Both of them had possessions – food and drink and provision, but the first

person's possessions were guarded as closely as possible, while the second person's possessions were received as from the Lord.

- The first person's job was meaningless toil, but the second person's job was a meaningful assignment.
- The first person's heart was filled with regret, yet second person's heart was filled with gratitude.
- The first person was stuck in the failure of the past; however, the second person was anticipating his future with the Lord.

And that is the way Solomon wraps up his case study. He writes here in *verse 20*:

For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart
(Ecclesiastes 5:20).

In other words, God keeps you moving forward, looking forward with the right perspective.^{vii} Not chained to your past but cheered on by your future. This is what Paul had in mind when he told the Thessalonians to keep looking forward to the coming of Christ for His church. It could happen at any day, so he wrote to these believers to comfort one another with these words – these words about their future (*1 Thessalonians 4:18*). We are heading for Heaven.

I read recently that 40% of shoppers will purchase a department store or restaurant gift card for friends and family sometime this year. But, evidently, the real winner in all of this is the store or that restaurant. According to estimates reported in the Journal of State Taxation unredeemed gift cards amount to an unbelievable amount of money. Many cards are often misplaced, accidentally thrown out, or only partially redeemed. On an average annual

basis, one billion dollars in gift cards go unused. Every year there are one billion dollars-worth of unredeemed gift cards.

I could not help but wonder how many believers go through life without redeeming, as it were, their gifts from God. I am not talking about health and wealth; God never promised those until we get home but then we will all be healthier and wealthier than we can imagine.

We have discovered four gifts or gift cards, so to speak, in this text that we need to redeem now by surrendering and obeying and thanking our sovereign Lord. Gifts that include:

- *The gift of being alive* – how are you using that gift from God?
- *The gift of enjoying what you have* – are you enjoying what you have or wishing you had more or something else? If so, you are not redeeming your gift card from God.
- *The gift of accepting where you are* – have you finally unpacked the suitcases in your heart and surrendered to His purposes in placing you right where you are?
- Finally, *the gift of enjoying what you do in life* – are you able to complete a day's work without pining away from a different job, or a better-paying job, or a better boss, or a bigger promotion to a higher-ranking job? Are you just working hard and doing your job for God's glory where you've been assigned for now?

Redeem your gift cards. Make the most of them. Thank God for them. Honor God with them. Anticipate the day when redemption is finally complete and you are home in Heaven with Him.

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i “Genius 6-Year-Old Uses Sleeping Mom’s Thumbprint to Buy Presents on Amazon,” The Huffington Post (12-27-16)

ii Quoted by Philip Graham Ryken, 1 Timothy (P&R Publishing, 2007), p. 258

iii Adapted from R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Bruce Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the OT: Vol. I (Moody Press, 1980), p. 287

iv Adapted from Michael A. Eaton, Ecclesiastes (IVP Academic, 1983), p. 118; Adapted from David A. Hubbard, The Preacher’s Commentary: Vol. 16 (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 147

v Adapted from R. Laird Harris, Gleason Archer, Bruce Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the OT: Vol. I (Moody Press, 1980), p. 392

vi Philip Graham Ryken, Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters (Crossway, 2010), p. 137

vii Benjamin Shaw, Ecclesiastes: Life in a Fallen World (Banner of Truth Trust, 2019), p. 77