

Revising the Rules of the Race

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 6

Ecclesiastes 6:1-6

Discussion Guide

Main Idea:

In *Ecclesiastes 6*, Solomon describes two racers and why each believes he is winning his race, but then Solomon goes on to explain why both are undeniably *losing* in the race of life. Solomon doesn't hide the fact that these two examples of racers are a tragic tale. Wealth, possessions, honor, and children do not assure you a winning life. These gifts may be yours in abundance, but without God and *His* life-giving ways, your race will be run in futility.

Discussion Points:

Solomon prefaces his descriptions of two racers with the observation that these contenders are a heartbreaking account: ***There is an evil that I have seen under the sun and it lies heavy on mankind*** (Ecclesiastes 6:1). This is troubling scene that he had seen many times in his lifetime, and he warns his readers to be aware of these situations.

- What are some evil things that lay heavy on mankind in our modern society?
- Why does Solomon go out of his way to preface his remarks and descriptions of the racers?
- Have you ever participated in a 'race' that you thought you were winning, only to find out that you did not run with the same rules? In what ways was that significant in your life?

The first contender in this race has wealth, possessions, and fame in abundance. By the world's standards, he was winning in the race of life.

- This appears to be a representation of King Solomon himself. Why would Solomon paint himself into this race, especially after his earlier reflections in *Ecclesiastes 6:1*?
- In what ways does this racer reflect your experiences or a friend's or family member's experiences, even if your 'stockpile' is much smaller than his? How did these things supply satisfaction and fulfillment or did they impress you as futile and empty?
- All good gifts are from God (*James 1:17*). How does a relationship and fellowship with God allow and help you to enjoy the gifts that you have been blessed with?

Discussion Guide Cont.

The second racer is blessed with a large family and a long life, but his soul is not satisfied with good things. According to the Ancient Near East, this man was a winner in life.

- How and why have you missed the best gifts in life? How have you found joy in the best things in life?
- Why is it better that a baby dies in the womb than live like this racer under the sun?
- How do you love and pursue good things, pure things, righteous things, and things that would leave a godly testimony and legacy to those around you?

Gospel Connection: (Taken directly from Stephen Davey's sermon, *Revising the Rules of the Race*.)

So where do you begin? You begin with Jesus who saves your soul and changes your heart and gives you life. You begin with Jesus and then you walk with Him and obey Him and talk to Him and follow Him and thank Him. He is the balancer of your life.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live . . . I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

It's useless to add years to your life – unless you add life to your years.¹ Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life*" (John 14:6); you start with Him and balance your life through Him. Don't live a day without Him!

Practical Implications:

Think: Am I trying to add years to my life with or without adding *His* life to my years?

Pray: Praise the Lord for His saving grace offered through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thank Him for being the way, truth, and the life and that I know Him.

Do: Continue to allow His life to influence mine in order to love and pursue good, pure, and righteous things that would leave a godly testimony and legacy to those around me.

Revising the Rules of the Race

Surviving Evil . . . Under the Sun, Part 6

Ecclesiastes 6:1-6

I read a story recently about an annual bicycle race in a town in India that has become quite a tradition in this community. All the cyclists line up on their bicycles at the starting line, while the crowds gather to cheer on their family member or friend. The official fires his starter pistol into the air, and the race begins. In this rather interesting tradition, the rules are not what you would expect them to be. In fact, in this race they are reversed. The object of *this* race is to see who can travel the shortest distance possible within the specified time. Racers are disqualified if they tip over and their feet touch the ground. The crowd grows wild as these racers inch forward, just enough to keep their bike balanced. When the time is up and the gun sounds, the contenders who have gone the farthest lose, and the person who has gone the shortest distance from the starting line is declared the winner.

Now just imagine traveling to India and entering that race but not understanding how the race works. When the starter pistol goes off, you pedal as hard and fast as you can. You are soon out of breath and sweating, but you are absolutely delighted because when you finally look around, no other racer is in sight – you have literally left them in your dust! As far as you can tell, these people in India aren't very good at riding bicycles. You are thinking, "This is fantastic; don't let up; pedal faster . . . go farther!"

Then the gun sounds and you're thrilled because you are unquestionably the winner when in fact you are unquestionably the loser - because you misunderstood the rules of the race and how the race is won.ⁱⁱ

The issue was never speed or distance. It was balance. If you take your Bibles to the starting line of *Ecclesiastes chapter 6*, Solomon lines up two racers, two contenders for the prize, so to

speak. He gives us a brief description of why each contender thinks he is winning the race, but then shows us why both of them are unquestionably losing in the race of life. Read with me just the first verse as this race is about to begin.

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun and it lies heavy on mankind
(Ecclesiastes 6:1).

In other words, before the official fires his starter pistol, Solomon tells us ahead of time that this is going to be a tragic tale; it is going to be a stomach churning, heart-breaking scenario. That is the idea behind the Hebrew word, *evil*. This is a tragic waste that Solomon has seen over and over again played out in the race of life.

Now mark this, Solomon writes – *it lies heavy on mankind* – it is a weighty, troubling burden to both experience and to witness. Solomon effectively says, "Let me tell you what I've witnessed in the rat race of life, down here under the sun. It isn't a pretty sight." And with that introduction, the race begins.

The Contender #1

Solomon next focuses our attention on the first contender in the race in *verse 2*:

A man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires
(Ecclesiastes 6:2a).

Notice in the three-fold description of this man, we are told he has *wealth or riches* (osher) which can refer to gold, silver, flocks, herds, houses, etc. We also see he has *possessions*

(nekes), a different Hebrew word describing a tremendous stockpile; he doesn't just have gold and silver and flocks and herds and houses – he has a tremendous accumulation of all of them. Thirdly, Solomon writes that this man has **honor** (kabod), a word that refers to fame or splendor.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is where it gets intriguing, because this sounds awfully similar to Solomon. Who had riches, possessions and fame like him? Many Old Testament scholars believe that Solomon is making a cameo appearance in this race here, that Solomon is effectively photo-shopping himself in as this first contender. Another clue is the fact that the only other place you find all three of these nouns describing someone is in *2 Chronicles 1:11 and 12* where God tells Solomon in a dream that He is going to give Solomon **wealth, possessions, and honor**. These are the same three nouns used in *Ecclesiastes chapter 6*; in fact, these are the only passages in the entire Old Testament where these three nouns appear in this same order.^{iv}

Solomon is the man with incredible wealth and a staggering accumulation of possessions and his fame is known far and wide; this opening phrase of *verse 2* would be his life verse – **he lacks nothing of all that he desires**. If Solomon wants it – Solomon gets it. There is little doubt that Solomon is painting himself in this race. He would be the guy with the custom made bicycle, the best shoes, the most aerodynamic helmet, the coolest outfit, and his water bottle would be made out of solid gold. And he is way out in front of the pack. He is unquestionably winning the race of life.

Not so fast. As Solomon finishes this self-portrait, notice the last part of *verse 2b*:

Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity (Ecclesiastes 6:2b).

This is futility! This isn't winning, this is an empty life! The Jewish Targum, which is a commentary or paraphrase on the Hebrew Old Testament, inserts some words here so that it

reads, “*Yet God does not give him power to enjoy them, on account of sin, but a stranger enjoys them.*”^v While we can't take that kind of liberty with the text, it certainly fits the profile.

God has given this man, Solomon, and others the gifts of wealth and possessions and honor, but either through sinful living, unbelief, or pride and selfishness, without a relationship with God the ability to enjoy anything is actually impossible.

God is ultimately the giver of all good gifts. *Every good gift comes down from the Father* (*James 1:17*). Remember from our last study – batteries are sold separately which make that Christmas toy actually run so that your kids can enjoy it. So also, in life, satisfaction is sold separately.

God not only is the giver of every gift, He is the one who empowers you to enjoy those gifts, to make them work, and that power comes from a relationship with Him that is marked by obedience, fellowship, and gratitude.

Solomon was out of fellowship with God. He was not obedient to God, and he was not grateful anymore. He had all these gifts, but not the power from God to enjoy them. Instead, we are told here in *verse 2* that a **stranger** – a *foreigner* enjoyed them – literally, a foreigner ate them.^{vi}

Solomon does not tell us who the stranger is – it could a thief, a conquering foreign ruler, a crooked broker, or someone you thought cared about you but robbed you blind. Solomon might even be forecasting the future as he looks at his wealth being handed over to a foolish son who is more than likely going to lose it all, which he ultimately does.

The point is, Solomon is essentially saying that while it might look like he is winning the race and is way out in front of the pack, he is coming to the realization that he has been racing with the wrong set of rules. He has been loaded with wealth and possession but without satisfaction or joy. He doesn't enjoy anything.

I came across an anonymous poem that summarizes it so well; it reads:

Money can buy a pillow, but not peace of mind.

Money can buy entertainment, but not satisfaction.

Money can buy food, but not an appetite.

Money can buy a house, but not a home;

Money can buy status, but not salvation;

Money can buy a passport to the world, but not to Heaven.

The Contender #2

Now let's go back to the race and notice the second contender in *verse 3* – just the first few lines:

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 . . .
(Ecclesiastes 6:3a).

Listen carefully to this description because as far as many people in the world are concerned, this guy is the real winner. He might not have any money but he has a full quiver of 100 children. Solomon is writing here with hyperbole – exaggeration.^{vii} Solomon's point of exaggeration is simple; this contender doesn't have a lot of money, but look at him - he is surrounded by a huge family and is evidently living long enough to see children and grandchildren and great grandchildren too. That is probably why he doesn't have any money – it's all in diapers and a big mini-van. But, in the Near East, family is a definition of success!

This man is obviously winning the race of life. But then Solomon inserts this spoiler, this rather tragic phrase – ***but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things.*** Gregory paraphrased this in his second century commentary on Ecclesiastes to read, "There is no goodness in his soul."^{viii}

The word **good** is a Hebrew word for appropriate, beautiful, fitting, precious, and valuable. It is a reference to those things that are truly the *best* things in life. Evidently, this

man wasn't interested in the best things, the right things, or the fitting things in life. His soul had no taste for righteous things. It might not have been obvious to his co-workers. The word here translated **soul** is a reference to his inner life – his heart, his true feelings, his true inclinations, his true interests, or what he truly enjoyed.^{ix} In other words, he has an unredeemed, unconverted, polluted, sinful soul. He has a big family but a wicked heart. He doesn't have any real appetite for pure and holy and righteous and fitting things.

And, evidently, in the privacy of his home he is surrounded by his children, these good gifts, but he doesn't really care about them. The implication is that he has no genuine interest in loving, disciplining, or leading them, either. He has this huge family but they are just status symbols. He really only cares about himself.

And who he *really* is becomes obvious over time to his children and to his family because of the stunning development in *verse 3*:

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. For it comes in vanity and goes in darkness, and in darkness its name is covered. Moreover, it has not seen the sun or known anything, yet it finds rest rather than he (Ecclesiastes 6:3b-5).

Solomon is contrasting a baby who dies in the womb with the death of a man who has 100 children, and he concludes that a stillborn baby is better off than this man who has lived a long life.

Why is that? That is because the baby does not have to experience the difficulties of life under the sun; it does not have to know anything about the pain and suffering of life; in fact, upon dying it goes immediately into the presence of his Creator God and immediately enjoys the honor and glory of God. But that's another sermon.

But this man, surrounded by children, experiences the greatest dishonor imaginable –

he is not even given a proper burial in the family cemetery plot. He literally dies unlamented.^x

The implication is that he has been a revered man among his peers; no doubt envied by many. There is little doubt that with such a family that he was certainly somewhat well-to-do and probably somewhat famous in his neck of the woods; in fact, everything on the outside looked great, but the reality was he didn't love God or his family or those things that were righteous in life. His family grows up to not love him either; in fact they actually detest him. And his wife does as well, if we are to understand that she is still alive; we don't know. What we do know is that nobody is crying at his funeral. They don't even throw him a funeral. He is buried in an unmarked grave somewhere with others who were homeless or remained unidentified.

Warren Wiersbe writes on this text that his family has merely wondered when the old man will die; and when he finally dies, they are only interested in the reading of his will.^{xi}

On the outside, for decades, it looked like this man was winning the race. If the rules of the race were having children, a big family, and huge reunions and birthday parties every weekend, this man was so far ahead no one could catch him. But then the gun sounded and it is discovered that those were not the rules for the race after all. It wasn't how many children he had but what he modeled in front of them.

And for us today, even if you don't have children at all, do you love and pursue good things, pure things, righteous things, and things that would leave a godly testimony and legacy to those around you? None of those things mattered to this man in life. Here's the point – he was dishonorable in life, and he was dishonored in death. Solomon adds an addendum to this contender's life – notice *verse 6*:

Even though he should live a thousand years twice over, yet enjoy no good – do not all go to the one place? (Ecclesiastes 6:6).

The oldest man who ever lived was Methuselah, who lived 969 years (*Genesis 5:27*), during the early years of God's newly created earth. Solomon basically says, so what if this contender here is able to stay in the race of life twice as long as Methuselah, let's say, for 2000 years? The conclusion remains the same – when the gun sounds, unless his heart had been changed, what good is a long life with an empty heart?

Here is Solomon's point: you could live twice as long as anyone else has ever lived, can have more children than anyone else has ever had, and can have more money and possessions than anyone else has ever owned, but if God is not involved, when the race is over, it will all be worthless.^{xii} Without a redeemed heart and a personal walk with God through Christ you might be like one of these contenders:

- The first contender in this race has a full bank account but no joy or satisfaction in life.
- This second contender has a full quiver but no love for what's good in life.

But make no mistake, they are both pedaling faster and farther than everybody else around them. The world is cheering them on, too, "Look how far they are getting along in life!"

Listen, beloved, the rules for a meaningful life are reversed. They are the opposite of what the world is cheering on. It is not how far or how fast you can pedal, it is how well you *balance*, balancing those things that truly matter in life.

So where do you begin? You begin with Jesus who saves your soul and changes your heart and gives you life. You begin with Jesus and then you walk with Him and obey Him and talk to Him and follow Him and thank Him. He is the balancer of your life.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "*It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live . . . I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me*" (Galatians 2:20).

It's useless to add years to your life – unless you add life to your years.^{xiii} Jesus said, "*I am*

the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6); you start with Him and balance your life through Him. Don’t live a day without Him!

This was the personal testimony of a Methodist circuit riding preacher in the early frontier years of this country who wrote:

All my life long I had thirsted
For a drink from some clear spring
That I hoped would quench the burning
Of the thirst I felt within.

Hallelujah! I have found Him
Whom my soul so long has craved!

Jesus satisfied my longings,
Through His blood I now am saved.

Well of water, ever springing,
Bread of life, so rich and free;
Untold wealth that never faileth,
My Redeemer is, to me.^{xiv}

It’s meaningless. It’s useless. It’s emptiness to try and add years to your life unless you add life – *His* life – to your years.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/23/2020 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, quoted in Jim Winter, p. 87

ii Adapted from Leith Anderson’s sermon, “The Height of Humility” (9-12-99); citation: www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2000/june/12487.html

iii Adapted from John Phillips, *Exploring Ecclesiastes* (Kregel, 2019), p. 185

iv Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland, General Editors: *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Vol. 6* (Zondervan, 2008), p. 310

v Quoted in Jim Winter, *Opening Up Ecclesiastes* (Day One Publications, 2005), p. 85

vi David A. Hubbard, *The Preacher’s Commentary: Vol. 16* (Thomas Nelson, 1991), p. 151

vii Walter Kaiser, Jr. *Coping With Change: Ecclesiastes* (Christian Focus, 2019), p. 127

viii John Jarick, translator; Gregory Thaumaturgos *Paraphrase of Ecclesiastes; 231 A.D.* (Scholars Press, 1990), p. 141

ix Adapted from Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 1983), p. 121

x Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes* (IVP Academic, 1976), p. 59

xi Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, *Ecclesiastes: Be Satisfied* (Victor Books, 1990), p. 75

xii Adapted from David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Integrity Publishers, 2004), p. 139

xiii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, quoted in Jim Winter, p. 87

xiv Clara Tear Williams, *Satisfied* (written in 1875)