

“I CAN Get Satisfaction” (Ecclesiastes 6:1-12)

A man walks into a shoe store and asks for a pair of shoes, size eight. The well-trained salesman says, “But sir, you take an eleven or eleven-and-a-half.” “Just bring me a size eight.” The sales guy brings the shoes and the man crams his feet into them and stands up in obvious pain. He turns to the salesman and says, “I’ve lost my house to the I.R.S., I live with my mother-in-law, my daughter ran off with my best friend, and my business has filed Chapter 7. The only pleasure I have left is to come home at night and take my shoes off.”¹

Can you relate to this man? Is your savings and checking account nearly depleted? Are you struggling to make ends meet? Are your cars and appliances ready to give up the ghost? Is your job tearing your innards apart? Is your marriage faltering? Are your kids making your life especially difficult? Are you sick and tired of being sick and tired? Are you lonely or depressed? Like Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones, do you exclaim, “I can’t get no satisfaction?” Like Bono and U2, do you lament, “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for?” If so, this passage from the Bible is tailor-made for you. In Ecclesiastes 6, Solomon tells us that *satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God’s blessings*. In this chapter, he shares two ways that you and I can experience true satisfaction.

1. Enjoy the blessings of this life (6:1-6). In this first section, Solomon discusses the three measuring sticks of success in Hebrew society: wealth, long life, and lots of children.² As wonderful as these good gifts are, unless God is in the midst we cannot enjoy them. In 6:1-2, Solomon shares his basic premise: **“There is an evil which I have seen under the sun and it is prevalent among men—a man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor so that his soul lacks nothing of all that he desires; yet God has not empowered him to eat from them, for a foreigner enjoys them. This is vanity and a severe affliction.”** The “evil” that Solomon speaks of in 6:1 refers to the painful misfortune³ of not being able to enjoy God’s good gifts. Solomon says that this misfortune is “prevalent among men.” This means that many people who have lived down throughout time have struggled with contentment and enjoyment. I know this is hard to believe, but it is in the Bible so it must be true. In 6:2, the active presence of God is emphasized. Solomon writes that God is the one who has given “riches and wealth and honor” (cf. 5:19). But here the blessing of material possessions is not balanced with the wisdom to enjoy them!

Solomon is penning a very important principle: Every good gift that God gives⁴ can only be truly and ultimately enjoyed if God empowers us. Riches, wealth, and honor do not automatically bring happiness, contentment, satisfaction, or a lasting benefit! Rather, they can bring unhappiness, ingratitude, restlessness, and grief. A perfect example of this is Howard Hughes (1905-1976). At age 45, Hughes was one of the most glamorous men in America. He dated actresses, piloted exotic test aircraft, and worked on top-secret CIA contracts. He owned a string of hotels around the world, and even an airline—TWA—to carry him on global jaunts. Twenty years later, at age 65, Howard Hughes still had plenty of money—\$2.3 billion to be exact. But the world’s richest man had become one of its most pathetic. He lived in small dark rooms atop his hotels, without sun and without joy. He was unkempt: a scraggly beard had grown waist-length, his hair fell down his back, and his fingernails were two inches long. His once powerful 6’4” frame had shrunk to about 100 pounds. This famous man spent most of his time watching movies over and over, with the same movie showing as many as 150 times. He lay naked in bed, deathly afraid of germs. Life held no meaning for him. Finally, wasting away and hooked on drugs, he died at age 67 for lack of a medical device his own company had helped to develop.⁵

The lesson of Howard Hughes is this: “Never judge a book by its cover.” Even though Hughes had it all, he did not have the supernatural ability to enjoy what he had been richly given. Some of the wealthiest people in the world are also some of the most miserable. This is what happens when God is left out of the equation. All that this world has to offer can be incredibly empty and unsatisfying. It can be vanity!

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) said it well, “There are two tragedies in life: one is not to get your heart’s desire. The other is to get it.”⁶ Truly, prosperity may be a greater test of character than poverty. A Romanian church leader who spent time in the West said, “95% of believers who face the test of persecution pass it; 95% who face the test of prosperity fail it.”⁷ How are you doing with the prosperity God has given you? Are you passing the test? If not, pray for the grace to find satisfaction in God’s good gifts.

I want you to imagine for just a moment that you absolutely love peaches. You have an insatiable appetite them. (Lord willing, this is not too far-fetched for you if you hate peaches.) Now imagine that God has given you countless cans of peaches. You are anxious to begin eating them, but then it dawns on you that you don’t have a can opener. Unless you are especially creative, you’re in trouble. You can’t enjoy all of these peaches without a can opener. If you are smart, you will ask God who gave you all these cans of peaches for a can opener. And then you will be able to enjoy your peaches. In the end, it doesn’t matter how many cans you might accumulate unless the Lord gives you a can opener to go with your cans of peaches. We need to enjoy daily life whatever it brings,⁸ trust in eternal life whenever and however physical life ceases,⁹ honor God,¹⁰ and obey God.¹¹ *Satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God’s blessings.*

In 6:3-6, Solomon uses two illustrations to drive home his point about the vanity of money and pleasure apart from God. He puts it like this: **“If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, however many they 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, for it comes in futility and goes into obscurity; and its name is covered in obscurity. It never sees the sun and it never knows anything; it is better off than he. Even if the other man lives a thousand years twice and does not enjoy good things—do not all go to one place?’”** Solomon offers us the eye-opening comparison of a stillborn child and a 2,000 year-old man who fathers 100 children. One enjoys the full rich feast of life and comes back for about 25 second helpings; the other doesn’t quite make it to the table.¹² Solomon exaggerates to make his point. The longest lifespan recorded in Scripture is Methuselah, and he lived to be “only” 969 years old (Gen 5:27). Imagine a man who lives more than twice that long—to be 2,000 years old—and has a hundred children in the process. Solomon’s point here is obvious: You could live twice as long as anyone else and have more children than anyone else, but if God is not involved and He is not granting you His satisfaction, it’s all worthless.

In fact, Solomon says that a miscarriage is better than such a person! Now we need to be careful not to misread Solomon at this point. He does not in any way argue that a literal “miscarriage of a child” is a good thing.¹³ His concerns here are more philosophical than literal. Obviously, it is tempting to kind of dance around the reality of a miscarriage being a part of this text. We all know people who have suffered through the tragedy of miscarriage. It’s absolutely gut-wrenching. My heart breaks for those parents who have suffered this ordeal. If you have experienced a miscarriage, I want you to know how sorry I am. Please know that I hurt for you and your church family hurts for you. Yet, in spite of your great pain and loss, I want us to hear and feel the weight of Solomon’s point: “It is *more* tragic for someone to be given life and possessions and honor and riches and not enjoy life’s good things than the tragedy of miscarriage.” You see for Solomon, he recognizes both of them as tragic. He’s just saying that it is more tragic for life to be granted and a person not to enjoy the good things in life than it is for a baby to not come to term. Do you feel his emphasis? You see, for all of us, we are on this side of life. We are on this side of life where we have been given opportunity to enjoy it, and Solomon is saying this, “If your life is not marked by the enjoyment of life’s good things, then it is better off that you were not even born at all.” In a nutshell his point is: “Better to miscarry at birth than to miscarry throughout life.”¹⁴ *Satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God’s blessings.* Will you join me in praying that the Lord will increase your level of satisfaction with the many good gifts that He has given you? If so, I can assure you that God will grant you a greater spirit of contentment.¹⁵

Now if we are to properly understand 6:3-6, we must step outside of our western mindsets. First, in ancient Israel, children were not an inconvenience; rather, they were considered a great blessing from God. Furthermore, children were not a financial burden; they were an economic asset to their family.¹⁶ Hence, the goal was to have a lot of kids. Second, a proper burial was also of utmost importance because it served as a statement about the significance of your life.¹⁷ Although this is not evident in our English versions, it is more likely that the “proper burial” does not refer to the rich man, but to the miscarried child. So the phrase would read: “Even if it does not have a proper burial, I say that the stillborn is better off than he.”¹⁸ Either way, the day of one’s death was important. Third, growing old was not looked down upon. In the book of Proverbs, Solomon says that “the honor of old men is their gray hair” and a “gray head is a crown of glory.”¹⁹ Long life was a great blessing from the Father.²⁰ Yet, all of these good gifts cannot provide a lasting benefit (cf. 1:3; 2:18).

If Solomon were alive today I think he would urge us to stop worshiping our kids and our health. All too often life revolves around family. So many people seek a release from materialistic culture by making family a god in our own day. They get married and think that marriage is going to be the place where they find ultimate satisfaction. Then suddenly, you find out that she recognizes all your weaknesses, and you’re not as nice as her dad, and its hard work, and its rough going. Suddenly, the thing that was going to provide you satisfaction is the source of your greatest heartbreak. That’s what Solomon is saying. Family, children, grandchildren, as great a blessing as these can be, are not the source of satisfaction. Similarly, many of us want to live long and prosperous lives. We try to eat right, work out, and make sure we look good. Yet, the truth is, many people who have been given long life do not use their years wisely for the Lord. So the issue is not long life per se, but rather how you live the life you have. It has been said, “It’s not the years in life but the life in the years.”²¹ Our health, children, and grandchildren can all be taken away so quickly. Sickness, bacteria, or an accident can rob us of long life and our children and grandchildren. Therefore, we need to enjoy what God has given us while we can. There is no guarantee that we will have our health and loved ones tomorrow. Therefore, live your life with enjoyment today! And remember *satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God’s blessings.*

[Solomon says, “Enjoy the blessings of this life.” Yet, he also wants you and me to...]

2. Accept the limitations of this life (6:7-12). In this second section, Solomon reminds us that life has its challenges and we need to accept this reality. In 6:7-9, he provides three proverbial summaries of the futility of life: “**All a man’s labor is for his mouth and yet the appetite is not satisfied. For what advantage does the wise man have over the fool? What advantage does the poor man have, knowing how to walk before the living? What the eyes see is better than what the soul desires. This too is futility and a striving after wind.**”²² In 6:7, Solomon says that we all work so that we can eat. When you boil it down, whether you’re a high-profile CEO of a Fortune 500 company or you’re a college student working part-time for Burger King, you essentially work for food. You just work for your next meal. It’s sad but true. Think about it: Have you ever developed a hunger for a particularly appetizing dish? And then you ate it. And by the next day, no matter how good the meal was, you were hungry again. There is a curious repetition of hunger. It doesn’t matter how well you ate yesterday, tomorrow you will be hungry again. A man works and works to buy food, but it’s never enough. He has to keep working because he continually gets hungry and needs to eat. Wealth will never satisfy you. It will never scratch your itch deep enough.²³

While the immediate reference is to food, Solomon’s intention seems to speak to anything material (Prov 16:26). Whatever it is that you pick to attempt to satisfy your soul will eventually be found to be lacking. Or to put it another way, stuff doesn’t satisfy. Why not? Because physical things can only satisfy physical needs, and that for which you hunger on the inside is a hunger of the soul. This is seen vividly in the Hebrew text of this verse. The word translated “appetite” (*nephesh*) in 6:7 is the same word translated “soul” in 6:2 and 3. *Satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God’s blessings.*

In 6:8 Solomon states, regardless of who you are (wise or poor) there is no ultimate satisfaction in this life unless you enjoy it. This leads to 6:9 which suggests, use what is available instead of yearning for that which is beyond you. Solomon's proverb is similar to the more familiar, "A bird in the hand is worth more than two in the bush" (Prov 17:24). A roving appetite is not satisfied with what is at hand; it impatiently looks for something new, something better. Generally speaking, actually having something that you want (and is good for you) is better than merely wishing you had that same thing.²⁴ What do your eyes see when they look at your life? Are your eyes satisfied or is your life lived around what the soul desires? Always more, always what you do not have; living for the future potential of filet mignon, and not enjoying the spam burger you have on your plate today.

When we take our children to the shrine of the Golden Arches, they always lust for the meal that comes with a cheap little prize, a combination christened in a moment of marketing genius—the Happy Meal. You're not just buying fries, McNuggets, and a dinosaur stamp; you're buying happiness. Their advertisements have convinced my children they have a little McDonald-shaped vacuum in their souls: "Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in a happy meal." I try to buy off the kids sometimes. I tell them to order only the food and I'll give them a quarter to buy a little toy on their own. But the cry goes up, "I want a Happy Meal." All over the restaurant, people crane their necks to look at the tight-fisted, penny-pinching cheapskate of a parent who would deny a child the meal of great joy. The problem with the Happy Meal is that the happy wears off, and they need a new fix. No child discovers lasting happiness in just one: "Remember that Happy Meal? What great joy I found there!" Happy Meals bring happiness only to McDonalds. Have you ever wondered why Ronald McDonald wears that grin? Twenty billion Happy Meals, that's why. When you get older, you don't get any smarter; your happy meals just get more expensive.²⁵ Yet, we must always remember *satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God's blessings*.

Solomon closes out this chapter in 6:10-12 with some sobering words: **"Whatever exists has already been named, and it is known what man is; for he cannot dispute with him who is stronger than he is. For there are many words which increase futility. What then is the advantage to a man? For who knows what is good for a man during his lifetime, during the few years of his futile life? He will spend them like a shadow. For who can tell a man what will be after him under the sun?"**

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, there are numerous allusions to Genesis. Solomon loved to draw upon the book of beginnings. This text is held together by the fourfold use of the catchword "man" (*adam*), here used not merely as a generic for human beings but as a term that points back to Genesis 2-3. Ecclesiastes 6:10 ("Whatever exists has already been named") does not refer to the divine naming of all things at creation; it is a literary allusion to Adam's naming of all living things in Gen 2:19. The noun *adam* looks back to the substance from which humanity came, the *adama* ("soil"), and so draws attention to human mortality. The participle "known" alludes to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the place at which Adam discovered that he could not contend with God and win. Adam contended with one "stronger" than he in an attempt to become "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). Adam was in effect the first "Teacher." He sought an encyclopedic mastery of knowledge (cf. Eccl 1:13) and even experimented with firsthand experience in good and evil (cf. Eccl 1:17). What he discovered was his own mortality and weakness before God. That is, he discovered the real meaning of his own name.

No sage, however brilliant or daring, has substantially added to Adam's discovery. Indeed, more exhaustive attempts at explaining the human situation only confound the facts and are of no benefit to humanity (6:11). Adam has already shown us what we are. The question in 6:12: "For who knows what is good" for *adam*, plays on the situation of Adam prior to the fall. The trees had "good" fruit, and the land had "good" gold (Gen 2:9, 12). It also plays on the name of the tree of his demise, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Adam's days, though they numbered 930 years (Gen 5:5), passed like a shadow and no one could tell him what was to follow him. What is true of him is equally true of all who bear his name. We are but weak mortals before an omnipotent God.²⁶

Therefore, we need to learn to be submissive to our great God, for He alone knows the end from the beginning. He is the only sovereign. God is the potter; we are the clay. More arguing only results in more futility for man (6:11). Man does not know what is best for him or what his future holds completely (6:12). We are ignorant of our place in God's all-inclusive plan. Human life is fleeting, it is like a shadow.²⁷ It is futile to fight with God; He always wins. James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) said it well, "Your arms are too short to box with God."²⁸ Or as C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) said, "To argue with God is to argue with the very power that makes it possible to argue at all." Disputing is a waste of time and effort. So long as I fight the hand of God, I do not learn the lessons He is attempting to place before me. When I find myself getting anxious about my life, it is usually because the horizontal has overshadowed the vertical. I have momentarily lost sight of who is still on the throne.²⁹

What if a person visited your house and started to criticize things? She doesn't like the colorful wallpaper, she doesn't like the decorations, she doesn't like the picture that hangs over the kitchen table. Once she is finished with her criticism, only one comment is appropriate. "Whose name is on the title deed of this house? When you start paying the bills around here, you get a vote on the decorating. Until then, feel free to keep your opinions to yourself."³⁰

This does not mean that we can never ask God a "why" question; however, I would strongly caution you to remember who it is you are talking to! Notice there are two questions introduced with "who" in 6:11 and 12. Solomon is implying that there is a "who" who holds the universe and its philosophical questions. He is leading us to the conclusion that *satisfaction in life is found by enjoying God's blessings*.

Ray Charles was once baited by a *60 Minutes* interviewer with a question about the inequity between his earnings and those of white entertainers. The question had overtones of racism and would've tugged at the heart of any man who was greedy. Ray's answer was disarming: "I make a good living. I can only ride in one car at a time, I live in one house at a time, sleep with one woman at a time." (I trust it was his wife.) Ray was right, and he was also content.³¹

My three children like certain types of food. If I am scooping them a bowl of ice cream or cutting them a piece of cake, they always ask for more before they have even begun to consume what I have served. My response is always the same: "Before I give you more, you need to eat what you have." In the same way, before we can expect God to give us more gifts, we must enjoy what we have.

Do you enjoy your life? Are you satisfied with your life? Do you enjoy your spouse, your kids, your work, and your church? If not, pray to God that He will change your perspective. Tragically, you may have believed a lie that you can be and do whatever you want. Is that true? Can you do whatever you want? I can't. Can I play in the NBA at 5'10' with a 2-inch vertical leap? Nope. Can I make myself into a worship leader? Nope. Can I be a supermodel? Well maybe. Okay, nope! There are certain things that I simply cannot do. I am limited by God in some areas and blessed by Him in other areas. Yet, here's what I can do: I can be satisfied with my wife, my kids, my ministry, because God has enabled me to be satisfied with all those things. Without His enabling me to be satisfied, I would never fully enjoy anything. But when I look beyond this world to the God who knows me and loves me, I find true and lasting satisfaction.

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Scripture References

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

Job 3:1-19

Jeremiah 20:14-18

Psalm 16:11; 37:4; 73:25-26

Psalm 102:11; 109:23; 144:4

Job 9:9; 14:2

Isaiah 45:9-12; Daniel 4:35

Study Questions

1. Do I enjoy the wealth, children, long life, and blessings God has given me (6:1-6)? Answer this question honestly before God: Where does my supreme joy and satisfaction reside? What things in my life am I holding too tightly these days? Has God been asking me to let go? What must happen for me to loosen my grip?
2. How do I include God in the various roles and responsibilities of my life? To what extent is He a true priority? In what ways does God provide meaning to my work, marriage, family, possessions, ministry, and personal interests?
3. Am I satisfied or dissatisfied with what God has given me in this life (6:7-9)? Why am I restless? What motivates me to do what I do on a daily basis? How important is my job to my self-image? Have I looked to my work to satisfy the needs of my soul? When I have success who receives the credit?
4. List the ways this chapter teaches the sovereignty of God (6:10-12). Does the thought of God's hand ruling over my life comfort me? Can I accept the fact that I am not sovereign and all-knowing but still trust in the God who knows me and loves me?
5. Will I recognize how fleeting and temporal this life is (6:12)? Read Psalm 39:4-6; 90:10-12; and James 4:13-17. What will I do this week to live in light of eternity?
6. Do I know the meaning of life and what will happen when I die? Can I explain the good news of Jesus Christ to another person? Does my life exude hope and purpose to my family members, coworkers, neighbors, and acquaintances? If not, why not? How can I become a more contagious Christian?

Notes

¹ Preaching Now (5-2-06) Vol. 5 No. 16.

² Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1993),

³ For the most part, as is the case here, the author records *raah* to indicate adversity, calamity, distress, trouble, misfortune, or the like (Eccl 2:21; 5:12 [twice], 15; 7:14, 15; 8:6, 11; 9:12 [twice]; 10:5, 13; 11:2, 10; 12:1, 11). If we understand this word to be pointing to a moral or spiritual deficiency, then we are suggesting that God's work (in 6:2)—and thus He Himself—is in some way "sinful." This is heresy! Rather, there seems to be some continuity with what Solomon has expressed in Eccl 2:18; 4:8; and 5:13-17.

⁴ Jas 1:17 tells us that "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow."

⁵ For more information on Hughes see <http://www.famoustexans.com/howardhughes.htm>.

⁶ Humorous Quotes attributed to G.B. Shaw: http://workinghumor.com/quotes/gb_shaw.shtml.

⁷ Bing, "Be Wise with Your Wealth."

⁸ See Eccl 2:24-26; 3:12, 13, 22; 5:18-20; 7:7-9.

⁹ See Eccl 1:3; 3:9; 5:16; 6:11.

¹⁰ See Eccl 3:14; 5:7; 7:18; 8:12.

¹¹ See Eccl 12:13.

¹² David Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 138.

¹³ Job 3:16 and Psalm 58:8 also refer to instances where it would have been better off to have been stillborn; this was a figurative way to express evil, experienced at its worst.

¹⁴ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament; Leicester, Eng., and Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983), 106.

¹⁵ Paul writes, "But godliness actually is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment" (1 Tim 6:6).

¹⁶ See Pss 127 and 128.

¹⁷ See Isa 14:18-19 and Jer 22:18-19.

¹⁸ Roland Murphy, *Ecclesiastes* (WBC Vol. 23a; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992); Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*.

¹⁹ Prov 16:31a and 20:29b.

²⁰ See Prov 3:16.

²¹ Jeremiah, *Searching for Heaven on Earth*, 139.

²² Constable suggests, "This is the last of nine times the phrase 'striving after wind' occurs (cf. 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16). It opened and closes the section of the book dealing with the ultimate futility of human achievement (1:12-6:9)." Dr. Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Ecclesiastes"; 2007 edition:

<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/ecclesiastes.pdf>.

²³ Tommy Nelson, *The Problem of Life with God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 87.

²⁴ Barry C. Davis, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, Multnomah Biblical Seminary unpublished class notes.

²⁵ John Ortberg, *Dangers, Toils & Snares: Resisting the Hidden Temptations of Ministry* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1994), 99-100.

²⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*,

²⁷ See Eccl 8:13; 1 Chron 29:15; Job 9:9; 14:2; Pss 102:11; 109:23; 144:4.

²⁸ Ray Pritchard, *Something New Under the Sun: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Living* (Chicago: Moody, 1998), 164.

²⁹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 183.

³⁰ Pritchard, *Something New Under the Sun*, 164-165.

³¹ Schmidt, *Soul Management*, 115-116.