

CHAPTER 6

INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES 6

The wise man goes on to expose the vanity of riches, as possessed by a covetous man, who makes no use of them; an evil, and a common one under the sun, (²⁰⁰¹Ecclesiastes 6:1); Who is described by the good things he has; which he has not a power to enjoy, but a stranger enjoys them, (²⁰⁰²Ecclesiastes 6:2); by his numerous offspring and long life; yet neither is he satisfied with good in life, nor has he a burial at death; wherefore an abortive is preferred unto him, (²⁰⁰³Ecclesiastes 6:3); For though many things may be said of that which are disagreeable, yet worse of him, and that has more rest than he; and besides, they both go to one place, the grave, (²⁰⁰⁴Ecclesiastes 6:4-6); and the vanity of an anxious labour for riches is further argued from the use of them, at most and best, which is only for the body, and the sustenance of it, but cannot satisfy the mind or soul, (²⁰⁰⁵Ecclesiastes 6:7); and this use a fool can make of, them, as well as a wise man; and a poor man, that is knowing, diligent, and industrious to live, as well as the rich, (²⁰⁰⁶Ecclesiastes 6:8). Wherefore it is best to enjoy and be content with present mercies, than to let loose the wandering desires after what may never be had, (²⁰⁰⁷Ecclesiastes 6:9); and especially it should be considered, that let a man be in what circumstances he will, he is but a man; and these circumstances are determined and appointed by God, which he cannot alter; and therefore it is both vain and sinful to contend with him, (²⁰⁰⁸Ecclesiastes 6:10). And, after all, a man is never the better for his carking cares and wandering desires, since there are so many things that increase vanity, (²⁰⁰⁹Ecclesiastes 6:11); and a man is so ignorant of what is good for him for the present, and of what shall be after him, (²⁰¹⁰Ecclesiastes 6:12).

Ver. 1. *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun*, etc.] The Vulgate Latin version reads it, another evil; but wrongly, for the same is considered as before, the evil of covetousness; which is one of the evil things that come out of the heart of man; is abominable to the Lord, contrary to his nature and will, and a breach of his law, which forbids it, and is the root of

all evil; this is an evil under the sun, for there is nothing of this kind above it; and it fell under the observation of Solomon in various instances;

and it [is] common among men; or, “great over men”^{f143}; or “over the man”, the covetous man: it spreads itself over them; few were free from it, even so long ago, in those early times, and in such times in which silver was made no account of, and was like stones in Jerusalem, as common as they; and yet the sin of covetousness, of hoarding up money and making no use of it, for a man’s own good, and the good of others, was very rife among men, (^{<11027>}1 Kings 10:27).

Ver. 2. *A man to whom God hath given riches, wealth, and honour*, etc.] By “riches” may be meant gold and silver, things which a covetous man is never satisfied with; and by “wealth”, cattle, with which farms and fields are stocked: the wealth of men, especially in former times, and in the eastern countries, lay very much in these, as did the wealth of Abraham and Job, (^{<10132>}Genesis 13:2 ^{<10103>}Job 1:3); and all these, as they are reckoned glorious and honourable in themselves; so they create honour and glory among men, and raise to high and honourable places; and these, as they go, they are usually put together, and are called by the name of honour and glory itself; (see ^{<10116>}Proverbs 3:16 ^{<14011>}2 Chronicles 1:11,12 ^{<10130>}Genesis 31:1). And they are all the gifts of God, which he either as blessings bestows upon men, or suffers men to attain unto, though a curse may go along with them; which is the case here, for no man whatever is possessed of them but by the will of God or his divine permission; (see ^{<13912>}1 Chronicles 29:12); and which a man may, and sometimes has, such a plentiful portion of;

so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth: he has not only for the supply of his wants, what is necessary for his daily use and service, but even what is for delight and pleasure; yea, as much as he could reasonably wish for; nay, more than heart could wish, (^{<13937>}Psalm 73:7);

yet God giveth him not power to eat thereof; the Targum adds, “because of his sin”; either he takes it away from him, he making no use of it; or his appetite is taken away, that he has no desire to it; or rather he has no heart to enjoy what he has, and scarce any part of it; not to eat and drink, and wear suitably to his circumstances, but grudges whatever he lays out on his back or belly, or in housekeeping in his family; for though God gives him a large substance, yet not a heart to make use of it, without which he cannot

enjoy it; and therefore it would have been as good, or better for him, to have been without it; (see ^{<2859>}Ecclesiastes 5:19);

but a stranger eateth it; the Syriac version adds, “after him”; enjoys it, not only a part of it, but the whole; one that is not akin to him, and perhaps was never known by him; and yet, by one means or another, either in a lawful or unlawful way, comes into the possession of all he has; this has been always reckoned a great unhappiness, (^{<2859>}Lamentations 5:2 ^{<3009>}Hosea 7:9). Hence it follows,

this [is] vanity, and it [is] an evil disease; it is a vain thing to be possessed of great substance, and not enjoy anything of it in a comfortable way, through the sin of covetousness; which is a spiritual disease, and a very bad one; very prejudicial to the soul, and the state of it, and is rarely cured. Juvenal^{f144} calls it frenzy and madness for a man to live poor, that he may die rich; he is like the ass that Crassus Agelastus saw, loaded with figs, and eating thorns.

Ver. 3. *If a man beget an hundred [children]*, etc.] Sons and daughters, a certain number for an uncertain. Some have had many children, and almost this number; Rehoboam had twenty eight sons and threescore daughters; and Ahab had seventy sons, how many daughters is not said, (^{<4121>}2 Chronicles 11:21 ^{<2001>}2 Kings 10:1); this was reckoned a great honour and happiness to have many children; happy was the man that had his quiver full of them, (^{<4003>}Psalms 127:3); such a case is here supposed;

and live many years, so that the days of his years be many; or “sufficient”, as Jarchi interprets it; he lives as long as life is desirable; lives to a good old age, to the full age of men, threescore years and ten; yea, supposing he was to live to be as old as Methuselah,

and his soul be not filled with good; does not enjoy the good things he has; has no pleasure nor satisfaction in the temporal good things of life, has not the comfort of them, and is always uneasy, because he has not more of them; and especially if his soul is not filled with spiritual good things, the grace of God, and righteousness of Christ;

And also [that] he have no burial; as Jezebel, Jehoiakim, and others; who is either destroyed by robbers and cutthroats, for the sake of his substance, and cast into a ditch or a river, or some place, where he is never found to be interred; or else, being of such a sordid disposition, he provides not for a decent burial, suitably to his circumstances, or forbids one; or, being

despised and disesteemed by all men, his heirs and successors either neglect or refuse to give him one; (see ²⁰²³Jeremiah 22:29);

I say [that] an untimely birth [is] better than he; an abortive is to be preferred unto him; it would have been better for him if he had never been born, or had been in such a case.

Ver. 4. *For he cometh in with vanity*, etc.] The Targum adds, “into this world.” Some understand this of the abortive, and render it, “though he cometh in with vanity”^{f145}, yet is to be preferred to the covetous man: others interpret it of the covetous man himself; and scrape of both: or, however, they may be compared together in these instances; the abortive comes into the world in vain, for nothing, and answers no purpose, as can well be observed; and the same may be said of a covetous rich man; he walks in a vain show, and is altogether vanity, in his coming in, in his life, and going out;

and departeth in darkness; or, “into darkness”^{f146}; goes out of the world without any notice taken of him; and goes down to the dark grave, where he lies in obscurity;

and his name shall be covered with darkness; the abortive has no name, and is never spoken of; and so the name and memory of such a man as is here described rot and perish: and in this respect the abortive has the preference to him; for though he is covered with darkness, yet no ill is ever spoken of him; whereas the name of the wicked covetous man is cursed.

Ver. 5. *Moreover, he hath not seen the sun*, etc.] This must be spoken of the abortive, and seems to confirm the sense of the former text, as belonging to it; and whereas it has never seen the light of the sun, nor enjoyed the pleasure and comfort of it, it is no ways distressing to it to be without it. The Targum is,

“the light of the law he seeth not; and knoweth not between good and evil, to judge between this world and that to come:”

so the Vulgate Latin version, “neither knows the difference of good and evil”;

nor known [anything]; not the sun, nor anything else: or “experienced”^{f147} and “felt” the heat of the sun, and its comfortable influences; which a man may, who is blind, and has never seen it, but an abortive has not; and

indeed has known no man, nor any creature nor thing in this world, and therefore it is no concern to it to be without them; and besides, has never had any knowledge or experience of the troubles of lifts, which every living man is liable to. Wherefore this is certain,

this hath more rest than the other; that is, the abortive than the covetous man; having never been distressed with the troubles of life, and now not affected with the sense of loss.

Ver. 6. *Yea, though he live a thousand years twice [told]*, etc.] Or two thousand years, which no man ever did, nor even one thousand years; Methuselah, the oldest man, did not live so long as that; this is than twice the age of the oldest man: there is one sort of the Ethiopians, who are said^{f148} to live almost half space of time longer than usual, called from thence Macrobian; which Pliny^{f149} makes to be one hundred and forty years, which is just double the common term of life. This here is only a supposition. Aben Ezra interprets it, “a thousand thousand”, but wrongly; so the Arabic version, “though he lives many thousand years”;

yet hath he seen no good, not enjoyed the good of his labour, what he has been labouring for and was possessed of; and therefore has lived so long as he has to very little purpose, and with very little comfort or credit; and especially he has had no experience of spiritual good;

do not all go to one place? that is, the grave; they do, even all men; it is the house appointed for all living, (~~REB~~-Job 30:23); and hither go both the abortive, and the covetous rich man; so that he has in this no pre-eminence to it. Jarchi interprets it of hell, the one place, whither all sinners go; but the former sense is best.

Ver. 7. *All the labour of man [is] for his mouth*, etc.] For the food of his mouth, as the Targum; for the sustenance of his body, for food and clothing, part being put for the whole: all that a man labours for is to get this; and if he does not enjoy it, his labour is in vain; meats are for the belly, which are taken in by the mouth, and for these a man labours; and if he does not eat them, when he has got them, he labours to no purpose;

and yet the appetite is not filled; even the bodily or sensual appetite; no, not even by those who eat the fruit of their labour; for though their hunger is allayed for the present, and the appetite is satisfied for a while, yet it returns again, and requires more food, and so continually: or, “the soul is not filled”, or “satisfied”^{f150}; it is the body only that is filled or satisfied with

such things, at best; the mind of man grasps after greater things, and can find no contentment or satisfaction in earthly or sensual enjoyments. This seems to be a new argument, proving the vanity of riches, from the narrow use of them; which only reaches to the body, not to the soul.

Ver. 8. *For what hath the wise more than the fool,* etc.] More delight and pleasure, in gratifying his senses, by eating and drinking: the wise man enjoys no more than the fool; the fool finds as much pleasure in the labour of his hands, which is for his mouth, as the wise man does; and the wise man can get no more satisfaction to his mind, from these outward gratifications, than the fool;

what hath the poor, that knoweth to walk before the living? either, what does the poor man want more than the rich man, that knows how to get his bread, and is diligent and industrious among men to live, and does get a livelihood for himself and family; he enjoys all the sweets and comforts of life, as well as the rich man: or what hath the poor knowing man? as Aben Ezra interprets it, according to the accents; what has he more or does he enjoy more, than the poor foolish man, provided he has but sense enough to behave himself among men, so as to have bread to eat, and clothes to wear; which is as much as any man can enjoy, be he ever so rich or so wise?

Ver. 9. *Better [is] the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire,* etc.] By “the sight of the eyes” is not meant the bare beholding outward riches, as in (²⁰⁶¹Ecclesiastes 5:11); but the enjoyment of present mercies; such things as a man is in the possession of, and with which he should be content, (²⁸³⁵Hebrews 13:5); and by “the wandering of the desire”, the craving appetite and insatiable lust of the covetous mind, which enlarges its desire as hell, after a thousand things, and everything it can think of; such a mind roves through the whole creation, and covets everything under the sun: now it is better to enjoy contentedly things in sight and in possession, than to let the mind loose in vague desires, after things that may never be come at, and, if attained to, would give no satisfaction;

this [is] also vanity and vexation of spirit: a most vain thing, to give the mind such a loose and liberty in its unbounded desires after worldly things; and a vexation of spirit it is to such a craving mind, that it cannot obtain what it is so desirous of.

Ver. 10. *That which hath been is named already, and it is known that it [is] man*, etc.] Which may be understood of the first man Adam, who has been, has existed, was produced by the immediate power of God, creating and forming him out of the dust of the earth; was made after the image, and in the likeness of God, a wise and knowing creature, a rich and powerful one, the figure of him that was to come, being the head and representative of all his posterity; and he has been named already, he had his name from the Lord himself, suitable to his nature and formation; he called his name Adam, from “Adamah”, the earth, from whence he was taken; and though he was so wise and great, and even affected deity, which was the snare laid for him by his enemy, it is well known he was but a man, of the earth, earthly, and returned to it again. Some have applied this to the second man, the Lord from heaven, as the ordinary gloss, and Jerom; and render it, “that which shall be”, so the Vulgate Latin version; as yet he was not man, though he had agreed to be and was prophesied of that he should; however he was named already the seed of the woman, Shiloh, Ithiel, the Messiah, or Anointed; hence by Solomon, in allusion to this name, his “name is [said to be] as ointment poured forth”, (²⁰⁰⁸Song of Solomon 1:3); and as it was known that he should be man, so it is now known that he is really and truly man; though not merely so, but God as well as man; yet as to his human nature his Father is greater and mightier than he; but this sense some interpreters despise and laugh at: and indeed though the whole of it is truth, it does not seem to be the truth of the text, nor suitable to the context: rather the words are to be understood of mankind in general, of all men, not only that have been, but that are or shall be; these were all appointed to come into being by the Lord; they have been in his eternal purposes and decrees, and their names are written or not written in the Lamb’s book of life; and they have all one common name, that of “man”, weak, frail, mortal, wretched man; they are, as is said of the Egyptians, men and not God, (²³⁰⁸Isaiah 31:3); particularly this is true of persons the most famous that have been in the world; such who have been in ages past, and their names have been called, or they have obtained a name among men, men of renown, that are on the list of fame; such who have been the most famous for wisdom, for riches, for strength, or for power and authority, and have even had deity ascribed to them, and divine worship given them; yet it has been notorious that they were but men, and not God, so Jarchi; and died as such; see (³⁹⁰⁸Psalms 9:20 82:1,6,7 ³⁵³⁸Ezekiel 28:2,8,9 ⁴¹²²Acts 12:22,23). Moreover, this may be understood of all things relating to men; that all that has been, is, or shall be, has been

already named of God, determined and appointed by him; so the Targum renders it,

“all is the decree of the Word of the Lord;”

all things relating to the temporal affairs of men, as to their birth and place of abode, their callings and stations of life; so to their circumstances of poverty or riches, which with all their craving desires and carking cares it is impossible for them to alter, or make them otherwise than they are; which is observed, to check the wandering and insatiable desires of men after worldly things;

neither may he contend with him that is mightier than he; the Lord of the world, as the Targum; not the angel of death, as Jarchi; the devil, which had the power of death, and is stronger than men; nor death itself, as others, against which there is no standing, (²¹⁰⁸Ecclesiastes 8:8) (²³⁸⁵Isaiah 28:15,18); but God himself, who is mightier than men, and with whom a creature should not strive or contend; either about his being and the make of it, or concerning his circumstances in the world, that they are not, greater and better than they be; or about God’s decrees concerning these or other things; but quietly submit to his will, and be content in whatsoever circumstances they are, considering that he is the Creator, and a sovereign Being, they are creatures, and dependent on him; and let their circumstances be what they will, wise or unwise, rich or poor, they are but men, and can never rise higher; see (¹⁸⁰⁸Job 9:3,4 33:12,13 ²³⁰⁰Isaiah 49:9,10 ⁴⁰⁰⁹Romans 9:19,20). It is observed by the Masorites that this is just the middle of the book.

Ver. 11. *Seeing there be many things that increase vanity*, etc.] As appears by all that has been said in this and the preceding chapters; such as wisdom and knowledge, wealth and riches, pleasure, power, and authority. Man is a poor vain creature himself, all he is and has is vanity; and these serve but to increase it, and make him vainer and vainer still;

what [is] man the better? for these things? not at all, rather the worse, being more vain; there is no profit by them, no excellency arises to him from them, no happiness in them, nothing that will be of any service to him, especially with respect to a future state, or when he comes to die. It may be rendered, as it is in the Septuagint and Vulgate Latin versions, “seeing there are many words that multiply vanity”; as all such words do that are used with God by way of murmur and complaint concerning a man’s lot

and condition in this world, and as expostulating and contending with him about it; these increase sin, and by them men contract more guilt, and therefore are not the better for such litigations, but the worse; and so the words stand in connection with (²⁰⁶⁰Ecclesiastes 6:10): but the former sense seems best, this being the conclusion of the wise man's discourse concerning vanity. So the Targum and Jarchi understand it of things, and not words.

Ver. 12. *For who knoweth what [is] good for man in [this] life?* etc.] To be in a higher or lower station of life, to live in grandeur or meanness, to be rich or poor, learned or unlearned; since that which seems most agreeable to human nature is at, ended with so much vanity, the occasion of so much sin, and often issues in ruin and misery, that no man knows what is best for him; and therefore it is the wisest way to be content with what a man has, and enjoy it in the most comfortable manner, and use it to the best ends and purposes he can. The Targum is,

“for who is he that knows what is good for a man in this world, but to study in the law, which is the life of the world?”

so the Midrash,

all the days of his vain life, which he spendeth as a shadow? or “the number of the days of vain life, which he makes as a shadow”^{f151}; that is, which God makes as a “shadow”, as Cocceius observes; makes to pass away swiftly: this is a description of the vanity, brevity, and uncertainty of human life; it consists of days, rather than of months and years; and those such as are easily numbered, and which pass away suddenly and swiftly, like a shadow that has no substance and reality in it, and leaves nothing behind it; or like a bird that flies away, as Jarchi, and is seen no more; such is the life of man, a most vain life, vanity itself; so it may be rendered, “the number of the days of the life of his vanity”^{f152}; since therefore he has so short a time to enjoy anything in, it is hard to say what is best for him to have, and the rather since he is quite ignorant of what is to come;

for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? he does not know himself, nor can any man inform him, what will become of his wealth and riches after his death, which he has got together; who shall enjoy them, and how long and what use will be made of them, either to their own good, or the good of others.