

# Ecclesiastes 6

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Preacher: Chris Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] Enjoyment. Enjoyment is a really big thing, isn't it, in our culture and the way that we live.

! The barista serves you a coffee. Enjoy. The salesman gives you the keys. Enjoy. People say, are you enjoying your work? Are you enjoying your children? Are you enjoying your retirement?

Enjoy, enjoy, enjoy. It really is the litmus test for everything, isn't it? Enjoyment. But do we really know the meaning of the word in life? It turns out from our passage this afternoon that true enjoyment is a very, very slippery thing. It's a very difficult thing to grasp and it's a complex thing in this world in which we live under the sun.

It's been a while since we've been in Ecclesiastes but in the chapter before this, the preacher of Ecclesiastes says these words, everyone to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, this is the gift of God. He tells us enjoyment is a power that doesn't come to us naturally or necessarily. It is not something that man can gain by himself within his own power. It is a power, it is a gift that only God can give. Enjoyment is received as a gift. Now, you might remember, it's been a while, hasn't it, since we've been in this book. But the preacher of Ecclesiastes takes us on a tour of the world, a realistic tour of the world. And Ecclesiastes is such a helpful book because it speaks to all of us, it speaks to us if we're Christians or if we're atheists, if we're agnostic or we're secularist or anywhere on the scale. It speaks to us without using complicated theological language or religious terms. And it just says to us, let's look at the world as it is. Let's see the world in its realism. Let's see what it's like to live in this world if there is no God. And let's see the absurdity of life in this world without God. And to realise that the systems by which we live and trust and expect are actually broken and frustrated. That what should happen in the world doesn't always happen. That there are anomalies in life, unexplained things. And his particular point today is that while God gives wealth and possessions and material things to people, true enjoyment is elusive, no matter what you've got. And that's the problem here, isn't it? If you look at verse 2, he gives the example of a man. He's an outstanding man, a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions and honour, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires. Can you imagine that? Yet, he says, God does not give him power to enjoy them, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity. It's a grievous evil. He's saying here that there is something worse than being a person who has absolutely nothing in this world. There is something worse than that. It is being a person who has everything without really enjoying anything.

He shows us two things here. He shows us, first of all, a grievous evil in this world. A grievous evil, this confused promise of enjoyment and human inability to enjoy things properly.

[ 4 : 13 ] A grievous evil, firstly. Stories were told in ancient Greece of the various punishments that the mythical god Zeus dished out on his enemies. And one Greek myth tells the story of Tantalus.

Tantalus had been invited to a meal with Zeus, the gods and the mortals eating together. But Tantalus upset Zeus over something. So, Zeus made Tantalus to go into Hades and to stand in a pool of water.

Sounds okay? But whenever Tantalus bent down to drink the water, the pool would drain underneath his feet. He was so near and yet so far to enjoying the water. As an added torment, Zeus positioned Tantalus below a tree full of fruit. But he could never quite grasp the succulent fruit there. Tantalus.

Tantalus. Homer describes the scene as Odysseus visits Tantalus in Hades. Odysseus says, I saw the awful agonies that he had to bear. The old man stood in a pool of water which nearly reached his chin. And the thirst drove him to unceasing effort, but he could never reach the water to drink it. Whenever he stepped to drink, the pool was swallowed up. And there at his feet was the dark, dry earth.

Trees spread their foliage high above him. And there dangled pomegranates, apples, sweet figs and luxurious olives. But whenever the old man went to grasp the fruit, the wind would toss up the branches into the shadowy clouds above. What a tortuous experience that must be. But it's not just for a world of myth.

[ 6 : 12 ] He says here, isn't he, this is the grievous evil, this phenomenon that actually exists in the real world. Where like Tantalus, a person can have everything around them while not enjoying anything truly. And this guy here in the passage, he has everything, doesn't he? Wealth, possessions.

He owns a detached London home. I quite like cars. And there's a guy on my street who has this gorgeous BMW, BMW Estate. It's got white leather trim. And I envy him, if I'm honest. I see him driving it. I envy him. But the preacher wants us to question, how are we judging the world? Who are we jealous of? Because it is a grievous thing, he says, that sometimes the ones that we envy are actually the ones that ought to be pitied. I judge that man on my street to be blessed and to be satisfied because of the things that he has outwardly. But it ain't necessarily so. For some reason, this man in the passage does not have this power to enjoy.

Enjoyment does not come as standard with stuff. He gives another example, doesn't he, in verse 3. 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. And he also has no burial. I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. We'll talk about the stillborn child bit in a moment. But just look at this man here. He has made it, hasn't he? In the culture in which the preacher speaks, he has done it. He's reached a peak. He's reached the kind of zenith of life, hasn't he? And he says, let's put a figure on enjoyment. Let's quantify, if we can, enjoyment. Look, how many years of life would you like? How much money would you like? How many children do you want? And the preacher really hands it up, doesn't he? He maxes out the numbers. This guy, he's got a hundred children. It's ridiculous, isn't it?

But he's maxing it out. A long life, verse 6. Let's think, how long do you want to live? A thousand years? No, verse 6, he lives a thousand times two years. Two thousand years. He's made it. He's got long life. He's got riches. He's got children. He's got everything. But even after all of that, verse 6, he enjoys no good. He sees no good. Somehow, he stood in a pool of affluence that drains away every time he tries to taste it. Maybe ill health plagues him.

[ 9 : 28 ] Maybe with more money just comes more worry. He gets sleepless nights. Maybe it's simply that it's just never quite enough, is it? How much will be enough? Just one more child.

Just a few more years of life. Just a bit more money. But no matter if you're penniless or a millionaire or you have a large brood, if you live out a century or more, the answer is often the same, isn't it? Just a little bit more. I'd be satisfied then. Just a little bit more. That's all I ask for. But enjoyment doesn't always come as standard with more.

Bankers have jumped off bridges asking what is the point of life? In some financial crisis they say I've lost it all and so I might as well end it all. But even more grievous than that the preacher tells us is the man who can think such dark thoughts about his own life when he's gained it all. When he's reached the top and he can't get any higher and he's still not satisfied. It's important we see what he's not saying here. He's not denying that some possessions and things that we can have are more satisfying than others.

Some things are just better, aren't they? It's important we see he's not saying that the man who lives under a bridge is objectively as well off as the man who lives in a mansion.

Some people have things which are better than others. Some people have more money and more children, more. God gives wealth and possessions and honour to some people more than others.

[ 11 : 39 ] That's life, isn't it? But he's warning us that enjoyment does not come necessarily with more. A person can have the best things in life and yet remain unfilled. He is a man who is not satisfied with good things and verse 3, he has no burial. Somehow with all of this stuff he can die unnoticed and unfulfilled and unlamented. And so the writer says to us it's time to rethink who you are jealous of and why. Because the people that we are quickly most jealous of in the world are not always the happiest. And often they are the most miserable people in the world. Because enjoyment is a power that comes as a gift from God. And it is not automatic in the gain that we take in life.

Now if we think about that and we look at it logically, that seems unfair, doesn't it? It seems unfair that even when a person manages to eke their way up the ladder and to earn lots of good things in

their lives, to get to the top, when a person does that in a right way, when they get everything that their heart desires, they're still left wanting more. It's unfair. Seems cruel, doesn't it? That's why the writer says that it's a grievous evil that this happens. That the system that we expect to work is broken. That things don't happen as they should. That enjoyment doesn't always come as we expect it to come with stuff. And that is a grievous evil. It shouldn't be like that. And yet, whilst it is a grievous evil, the world is like that as a kindness from God. It is a kindness. The world is like that and we cannot do anything about it. Just look at verse 10 there. Whatever has come to be has already been named. And it's known what man is and that he is not able to dispute with one stronger than he.

[ 14 : 08 ] That is how the world is. And God has subjected the world to frustration. We know that, don't we? Ever since before, back in Genesis 3.

God has placed a curse on the world. Frustration. And there is evil and grievousness in the world and in the systems by which we hope to live.

And whilst that is a terrible thing, it is also a great kindness from God. It is a kindness to wake us up. And to burst the bubble.

Because secondly, it is a gracious kindness. This confused way of things. Of enjoyment. Of our inability to always enjoy things, even when we gain things.

It is a grievous evil and it's a gracious kindness. I don't know if you are sort of sat here listening to the preacher in Ecclesiastes 6.

[ 15 : 09 ] And you might sort of think, well, I get what he is saying here. But actually, I am okay. I feel quite content with my life.

I am not a millionaire. I rent. And that's okay. I am fine with a mediocre life. I am fine with Friday night TV.

And takeaways. I am fine with my family. And relative good health. I am not an athlete. But I am okay. I am good. I don't need more. If that is you, let me say that you are gifted.

That is a gift from God. To be content in that way. God has given you this time. He has arranged circumstances in your life that you would feel like that.

You can enjoy things. And that is a good thing. Perhaps you don't even know that it's a gift. But it is a gift from God. And you are to be envied if that's you.

[ 16 : 11 ] God is helping you to enjoy life. But even if that is you, the preacher wants all of us to feel the tension of why that isn't true for many other people.

You might not be asking the questions that the preacher is asking. But somebody needs to. Because things are not always how we assume they should be. More does not always mean better. And God kindly speaks to us in that phenomenon. saying to us that this world and your things actually are no place for ultimate rest and satisfaction and enjoyment.

That the enjoyment of good things is not in the things themselves. enjoyment isn't as standard. But it comes from me.

Says God. He said, I want to turn your thinking upside down on this. And so what the preacher does is he gives us extreme examples, doesn't he?

[ 17 : 20 ] We've had the extreme man with all the riches and the children. And then we get this other example of a stillborn child in verse 3. When we hear that verse and when we hear those words stillborn child it feels quite frightening, doesn't it?

It feels worrying that he uses this comparison and he claims that a stillborn child can be better off than anyone. We kind of come back away from that, don't we?

Something jars with us there. He's using very powerful poetic language. But actually what he says is true here. He says, I've shown you one extreme, the man who has everything.

He has made it. Now let me show you the other extreme, the one who has nothing. The one who never had anything.

A stillborn child. And the question that hangs in the air is who is better off between the two? And he shocks us, doesn't he? A stillborn child is better off than the man who had all those things in his life.

[ 18 : 40 ] He plays with our minds here. He exposes the scales we use to judge true enjoyment in life. Because according to the systems of the world we naturally trust in and live by, the answer seems obvious, hasn't it?

Which is better off? Well, we want to say, do you even need to ask the question? We think of the stillborn child here and we say, don't we, what a waste.

What a waste of life. It is tragic, isn't it? It is a terrible thing. But when we say, what a waste, might we say that in the wrong way?

Might we say that because we feel that that person died before they had a chance to live? Before they had a chance to experience stuff and to experience things and to gain anything?

They never got the chance to go to a restaurant. or to go to a musical. They never got the chance to earn their millions, did they? How tragic. What a waste.

[ 19 : 57 ] They've never even seen the sun. They've never felt the breeze on their face. They've never gained anything in this life. And it's the worst possible life we can imagine, isn't it?

one that never even got started in the first place. Never enjoying anything. But that's just it, isn't it? Enjoyment does not come as standard with those things. For us, enjoyment is so mingled with stuff and experiences and gain in God himself.

And so the stillborn child can possess what the wealthy man fails to grasp in all of his affluence. Just look at verse 5.

Moreover, it's not seen the sun or known anything yet. It finds rest rather than he. how can that be true?

[ 21 : 02 ] How can that be right? How can that be real? When there's no source of life or enjoyment or rest or happiness that lies behind the things that we gain in this world, for the secularist or the atheist or the agnostic, actually, there is no answer to that, is there?

As to why he would say this. a stillborn life is simply a tragic waste of life. But the preacher shows us that life and rest and happiness and fulfilment are not gained in things and experiences in isolation from God himself.

It is a great comfort, isn't it, to those who mourn at such an awful moment, that there is more to real enjoyment and real life than simple sensory experience.

That we can see here that there is more to be life than the eye can see. Life is a gift, and enjoyment of life is a gift.

And God can give that gift to someone who has nothing in the world's eyes. someone who never had anything in the first place, whose life never even got started.

[ 22 : 30 ] God can give that gift to that person. The answer this afternoon in enjoyment isn't having less, necessarily. It's okay to have nice things, isn't it?

It's okay to have good things. But you can be at rest even with nothing. How? The answer is God, isn't it?

It's an oxymoron that Jesus Christ lived by, and he died by, one who possessed everything as the Son of God, eternal Son of God, who possessed all of the riches and glory and comfort and satisfaction of heaven, and yet he chose to have nothing, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.

And now he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Discontentment in great riches is a grievous evil in this world, but it's also a great kindness.

God isn't withholding your right for more when he doesn't give it to you, when you ask for it. He is exposing your need for him.

[ 23 : 47 ] And if you feel discontent with all that you've got today, that is God's mercy to you. That is his kindness to bring you to himself.

He won't let us be content with second best, will he? He wants you to be content with him and in him, the giver of true enjoyment. Let's pray together.

Let's pray. Let's pray.