

8.

VI. GREAT WEALTH IS VANITY
Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:9

A sixth topic that Solomon said was vanity and empty was great wealth. He possessed wealth far beyond any Israelite king before him or after him. He was in the best position of any person in Israel throughout its whole history to discuss the subject

of wealth, and he had found that possessing great wealth had left him unsatisfied.

Solomon cited five examples of how great wealth does not satisfy.

- A. If you see oppression of the poor and snatching away of justice and right in the province, do not be amazed over its happening (5:8-9),**
- 1. Because one official is watched over by a higher one, and higher ones are above them (5:8b).**
 - 2. And profit from land [is divided] among them all (5:9a).**
 - 3. A king [collects] from [every] cultivated field (5:9b).**

The first example was that wealth is drained away by oppressive taxation at every level of government. Solomon said, if his readers saw government officials oppressing the poor and denying justice to them, they should not be surprised. Such actions were all too common in his day, as they are all over the world today. Because of the fallen nature of mankind, people tend to use any power they have to take advantage of others. Government authorities have the greatest temptation of all to oppress others, because they have the greatest human power of all.

authority, he found that the higher official was involved in the same kind of oppressive actions and, therefore, unwilling to defend him. Even the higher officials above them were equally dishonest, so that the poor person was left without recourse.

Solomon said officials in his day watched over each other. By “is watched over” he meant providing protection. Lower officials were protected by higher officials, to keep their dishonest schemes from being exposed. If a person sought protection from one official by going to a higher

However, the wealthy person fared no better. He was oppressed with heavy taxes because of his wealth. The profit that came from his land was collected by officials at every level of the government, and the king got his portion of the profit from every cultivated field in the whole land. The more profit a person made, the more of it he had to pay to officials through taxation.

Solomon’s point was that accumulating great wealth was vanity, a futile enterprise, because rulers require great portions of it to support both legitimate services and illegitimate oppressions.

- B. One who loves money is not satisfied with money, nor one who loves abundance with wealth. This also is vanity (5:10-12).**
- 1. When goods increase, the ones eating them increase, (5:11a).**
 - a. So what advantage do their owners have (5:11b),**
 - b. Except to see [them] with his eyes (5:11c)?**
 - 2. Sleep of the working one [is] sweet (4:12),**
 - a. Whether he eats a little or a lot (5:12b),**
 - b. But the overabundance of the rich one does not allow him to sleep (5:12c).**

Solomon's second example of why great wealth is vanity was that the more goods a man has the more workers he must hire and feed to take care of his many possessions and responsibilities. In Hebrew the word translated "goods" is singular. It means the sum total of all of a man's good and valuable possessions and holdings. When a man has an abundance of possessions and investments, a great portion of his wealth is consumed by paying his workers so they can eat, and little is left for him to use for himself. He has wealth on paper, but that wealth gives him little to use for himself.

After a while the wealthy owner may wonder what advantage he has over his workmen. They can

go to bed at night and sleep soundly, because they did their work and do not have to carry home with them the problems of the day. The business and its problems do not belong to him because he is not the owner, so he goes home, forgets them, and sleeps soundly. However, the owner carries those responsibilities on his shoulders all the time, because he owns them and is responsible for them day and night. He thinks and worries so much about them he cannot sleep at night. His great wealth causes him burdens, not satisfaction. Owning so many enterprises turns out to be a vanity, an accomplishment that produces no satisfaction.

C. I saw a sickening calamity under the sun (5:13-20).

1. Riches were being kept by their owner to his detriment (5:13b-14),

a. And those riches were lost in a bad investment (5:14a).

(1) And he fathered a son (5:14b),

(2) And he did not have anything in his hand (5:14c).

b. Just as he came out from his mother's womb, naked again [he] went (5:15-17).

(1) Just like he came, he also did not take away anything for his trouble that he might carry in his hand.

(a) Again that was a sickening evil (5:15b-16a)

(b) Wholly parallel to [how] he came, thus he went,

(2) So what advantage [came] to him that he kept on laboring for the wind (5:16b)?

c. Also all his days

(1) He ate in darkness (5:17a),

(2) And he was exasperated to abound in both sickness and anger (5:17b).

2. Behold, that which I myself have observed to be good and beautiful is (5:18-20):

a. To eat and to drink and to see pleasure in all the labor with which one labors under the sun during the few days of his life that God has given him because that is his portion (5:18b).

b. Also every man to whom God has given wealth and possessions and caused him to have power to eat them and to carry his portion and to rejoice in his labor (5:19-20),

(1) That is the gift of God (5:19b).

(2) For he does not reminisce a lot on the days of his life because God causes him to respond with joy in his heart (5:20).

Solomon's third example of why great wealth is vanity was that it can be lost so easily. If a person depends on what he owns to give him worth, he is basing his value on a shaky foundation. Wealth is a fragile foundation, because it can so quickly vanish away.

Verses 13b-17. A sickening example. Solomon said it made him sick when he saw what one man went through because of an unwise

investment. The man had been denying himself pleasures he would like to have had so he could save money for some need he might have in the future, but he lost all he had saved plus all he owned because of a mistake in judgment (v. 13). Then he fathered a son, and he did not have anything that he needed to provide for his son (v. 14).

Later the man died, and he was as penniless as the day he was born (vs. 15-16). Solomon felt

strongly that dying in complete poverty was a tragedy, and he showed it by restating in different words that the man did not retain anything he could carry in his hand for all his troubles in life. He did not mean it was a tragedy that the man could not carry away his possessions after he died. He meant it was a tragedy that the man died without owning anything he could carry or touch with his hand. Solomon said that to him that was a sickening tragedy. Then he repeated again in still different words that the man's condition when he went away was exactly parallel to his condition when he came into the world. Solomon asked in dismay what advantage had the man gained from all his labors. It was as if he had been laboring for the wind.

All English versions either translate verses 15-16 as the condition in which Solomon expected the man to die or as the statement of a general principle that applies to every person who is born and dies. Neither of those views is appropriate. Solomon gave no indication that in verse 15 he was changing his account of what he had seen to what he expected. In fact, he continued to stress that the man's predicament was sickening. If the man was still alive, Solomon could not have been that sure that he was not going to recover from his loss and was going to die penniless. Hebrew verb forms do not have time significance, so it is just as accurate to translate the verbs in verses 15 and 16 in past tense as in future tense. The context indicates Solomon was continuing his account of what he had seen, and it calls for the past tense.

Also Solomon gave no indication in verse 15 that he was beginning to talk about a general principal that applied to all men. In fact, he continued to speak about a sickening evil. It is hard to see why he would have been sickened by the thought that every man leaves this life without being able to take anything with him into the next. It is easy to see why he would have been sickened that a man would die without being able to show one accomplishment he had made in life. Seeing that tragedy happen strongly supported his contention that great wealth is vanity, because it can so easily be lost. Translating verses 15-16 as a general principal that applies to all men makes them irrelevant to Solomon's subject and weak in their impact. Translating them as an account of how the

the man died allows them to be a powerful illustration of Solomon's very valid and relevant point.

Solomon further elaborated on the man's predicament by saying that he lived all his days in darkness or in depression and gloom (v. 17). In addition the pain of his great losses, his poverty caused him to be exposed to sicknesses, and he was afflicted with them throughout the rest of his life. Sickness on top of his poverty kept him angry at life and angry at himself for the failure he had brought on himself by his unwise investment. He not only died in sadness. He lived in sadness until his death because of his great loss.

Verses 18-20. *Regardless of your portion in life, find the good that is in it and enjoy it.* Faced with the knowledge that any man might face the same kind of losses, Solomon said the best advice he could give to a man was to be content with the life God gives him and to do good with it. He said, if a person will take that approach to life, he will find it to be satisfying and beautiful.

Solomon applied that principal to a man who has only enough to eat and to drink to sustain his life (v. 18). He challenged that person to enjoy the portion God had given him in life and do something good with it. When Solomon spoke of the man's portion, he was comparing it with the division of the land of Israel among the tribes and the families of the nation in the days of Joshua. God assigned each family a portion of the land, which they were to continue to own and use through all later generations. Solomon saw every person's condition in life to be just that kind of gift from God. He was asserting that each person's position in life is the portion God assigned to him. God had a reason for assigning him that portion, and he should be grateful for it and enjoy doing what God intended for him to do with it. The person who takes that approach to his position in life does not spend time talking about what used to be or what might have been. Instead he gives attention to the joys of the present day. That person has learned the secret of being happy and contented with the portion God assigned to him, and being blessed with that attitude is far superior to possessing great wealth.

However, Solomon applied the same principal to a man who has great wealth (vs. 19-20). He said that when a man of great wealth can eat sensibly from what he owns, carry well the responsibilities God gave him, and enjoy the work that is involved, that also is a gift from God. That man also does not spend much time remembering or thinking about

what used to be. Also he does not worry about what might be. He is too busy responding to the challenges he is facing each day. In approaching the problems he faces each day as challenges God has given to him, he finds joy in grappling with them. As he faces his challenges with joy, he too finds contentment.

D. There is another evil that I have seen under the sun, and it is frequent among men (6:1-6).1.It is a man to whom God gives wealth and possessions and honor and nothing is lacking to his life of all that he might desire, but God does not enable him to enjoy them, so that an outsider gets to enjoy them (6:2).

a. This is futility (65:2b).

b. And it is a severe affliction (6:2c).

2. If a man fathers a hundred children and lives so that the days of his years are many and he himself is not satisfied out of the good things and also a burial, I say a stillborn child is better off than he is (6:3-5).

a. For in futility it comes and in darkness it goes, and its name is covered with darkness (6:4).

b. Although it has not seen the sun and it has not known anything, it has rest more than he (6:5).

3. And if he lives a thousand years twice and does not see any good thing, do not all go to one place (6:6)?

Solomon gave a fourth example of why great wealth is futile. It was that many times a wealthy person is afflicted so that he cannot use or enjoy his great wealth. He said he had frequently seen people who had wealth and possessions enough to buy anything they could desire, but they were hindered from enjoying it. He probably was thinking about a man with a permanent illness or injury that kept him from using any of the expensive items he owned. That man had to let someone else spend his money for him. He was the owner of a fortune, but someone else got the joy of spending it. He lived in futility because he had great possessions, but he could not enjoy using any of it.

If a man in that condition fathered a hundred children and lived many years, his life would be as

dark as that of a stillborn child. The child would come into the world lifeless and in darkness. He would leave the world the same way and would never know anything, but that child still would be better off than the man who had great possessions but no way to use them or enjoy them. That man would know what he was missing, but the stillborn child knew nothing at all and was not made miserable by knowing about what he could not enjoy. Both the man and the child were headed to the grave, but at least the child did not know about what he was missing.

He stressed the same thought again by saying that, if a man lives 2,000 years and is not able to use what he owns, what use is his wealth?: He is headed toward death, just like everybody else. His wealth has gained him nothing.

E. All of a man's labor [is] for his mouth, and yet his soul is not satisfied (6:7-9).

1. So what advantage does the wise one have over the fool (6:8),

a. And what advantage does the poor man have who knows how to walk in front of the living ones (6:8b)?

b. Eye sight is better than a wandering soul (6:9a)

2. This also is vanity, grabbing at the wind (6:9b).

Solomon gave one final example of why great wealth is vanity. That example is that everybody is working for their mouths, that is, for the things that please their senses; but the things that please the senses do not satisfy a person's soul or inner being. Though he expressed that fifth example in only a few words, the problem to which those words point is the most widespread and the most critical of all of his examples that illustrate the inadequacy of material possessions.

Commentators have had a hard time with these verses. The reason for their difficulty grows out of uncertainty concerning the meaning of the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ, *nephesh*, which is translated above as “soul.” The difficulty translators face in translating that word into English is shown in that the King James Version translates it in 35 different ways. It translates the word as “soul” 428 times, but in this passage it uses the translation “appetite” in verse 7 and “desire” in verse 9. All major English versions follow the example set by KJV or use translations that are so free it is difficult to see how they connect with the Hebrew text. To understand this passage it is essential to form a conclusion about the correct meaning of the word *nephesh*. To arrive at a conclusion about its meaning, it is necessary to survey its usage in the Old Testament. Please take time to consider the brief survey of that usage that follows:

(1) In the Genesis records of creation and of the flood, a fish, a bird, or an animal is called a **living “nephesh”** (Gen. 1:20,21,24; 2:19; 9:10,12,15,16). In those verses, KJV translates the word as “creature.” In those verses, the word refers to a being that has independent life, which fish, birds, and animals have but nothing in the newly created universe had prior to the creation of living beings on the fifth and sixth creative days. In those verses, the word *nephesh* refers to the being itself, not the entity or characteristic that made it a *nephesh*.

(2) The Genesis record of man's creation says, **“Then Jehovah God formed the man of dirt from the earth, and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of lives; and the man became a living nephesh.** (Gen. 2:7). In that verse, KJV translates the word as “soul.” In that verse, the word means that man also is a being that has independent life.

At the same time, the verse indicates that something was different about the man from animals, because God did not make man a *nephesh* by creation only but also by breathing His own breath into him. In addition, the verse uses the plural “lives,” indicating that man was given more than one kind of life.

(3) Numerous verses in Genesis use the word with reference to people by speaking of a person's having a *nephesh*, rather than being a *nephesh* (Gen. 12:13; 19:20; 27:4,19,25,31; 34:3,8; 42:21). One verse emphasizes that point by saying Rachel's *nephesh* departed from her when she died (Gen. 35:18). In those verses, KJV translates the word as “soul.” Those verses mean that a *nephesh* is an invisible but real entity that a person has inside, which is alive and which gives him or her life. At the same time, other verses in Genesis continue to speak of a person's being a *nephesh*. (Gen. 12:5; 17:14; 46:18,22,25,26,27). In those verses also, KJV translates the word as “soul.” Comparing those two ways that the word is used reveals that, when a person has a *nephesh*, it is such an important part of him that it identifies what he is. Having a *nephesh* makes him be a *nephesh*. The English word “soul” is used in the same two ways. It is common to speak of a person's having a soul, but it is also common to call a person a “soul.” The usage shows that the English word “soul” is virtually equivalent to the Hebrew word “*nephesh*.”

(4) In later Old Testament verses, the words “heart” and “*nephesh*” are frequently used together when speaking of a person's seeking, loving, serving, obeying, turning to, or entering into covenant with God (Gen. 4:29;6:5; 10:12; 11:13,18; 13:3; 26:16; 30:2,6,10, plus 18 verses in Joshua, Kings, Chronicles, Isaiah, and Jeremiah). A well-known example is Deuteronomy 6:5, **“And you shall love Jehovah your God with all your heart and with all your “nephesh,” and with all your might..”** In all of those verses, KJV translates the word as “soul.” Repeated use of the words “heart” and “*nephesh*” together, shows that they are two separate entities but that they function in unison. To the Hebrews, “heart” meant the organs of a person's body that were involved in emotion and in thought. *Nephesh* meant to them an intangible entity in the person's makeup that also was involved in emotion and thought. The two were distinct from

each other, but when it came to relating to God the two worked together. The invisible entity that gave the person life was as real and as necessary as a person's physical organs.

In Genesis 6:5, the addition of the words ***“and with all your might”*** indicates that both “heart” and “*nephesh*” were distinct from a person's outer body, that is, from his skin, muscles, and bones. “Body” or “might” means a person's outer physical structure. “Heart” means the inner organs that enable a person's physical structure to have physical life and to function independently. “Soul” means the entity that enables a being to have self-awareness and relationships with other living beings. A person needs to involve all three in loving, worshiping, and serving God.

(5) In Leviticus, as God revealed his commandments for Israel's rituals, He spoke repeatedly of sins that a *nephesh* might commit (Lev. 4:2; 5:1,2,4,15,17; 6:2; 7:18,20,21,25,27; 17:10,12,15; 18:29; 19:8; 20:6 (twice); 22:3,6; 23:29,30). In other verses, He spoke of “your *nephesh*” when he talked about a person's sinning, repenting of sin, or being covered from sins (Lev. 16:29,31; 17:11 (twice); 20:25; 23:27,32; 26:15,43). In all of those verses, KJV always translates the word as “soul.” Those verses show that in people, whether the *nephesh* was considered to be an entity within a person or the person himself, a *nephesh* was involved in a person's sin and in his receiving covering from his sins. Thus, they show that in people, *nephesh* had the ability to relate to God, to sin against God, and to be restored to God. Animals do not have that ability, so a human *nephesh* is an entity animals do not have. Animals have a *nephesh*, but human have a *nephesh* that gives them moral capability and responsibility.

The above uses of the word *nephesh* lead to the following conclusions: (1) *Nephesh* is the part of a being's makeup that enables it to do more than simply react to environment, as physical organs do. *Nephesh* gives a being a conscious, independent existence. (2) Both animals and humans have *nephesh*, though a human's *nephesh* has much more advanced capabilities than an animal's *nephesh*. (3) Human's also have another *nephesh* that animals do

not have, which enables them to have moral responsibility and relationship with God. In English, that *nephesh* is rightly called the person's “soul.” (4) “Appetite” is a function of a being's inner organs, not of the invisible entity that gives it life. Therefore, the word “appetite” is not a valid translation for the word *nephesh*.

Understanding the word “*nephesh*” in Ecclesiastes 6:7 and 9 to mean “soul” gives meaning to Solomon's statement, whereas understanding it to mean “appetite” or “desire” does not. Explaining how giving all of one's attention to feeding the mouth will never satisfy the appetite is a puzzle. Feeding the mouth is what satisfies the appetite. However, saying that giving all of one's attention to feeding the mouth will never satisfy the soul is a fundamentally important statement about human existence.

Solomon's statement was giving his final punch to his argument that great wealth is futile. He said that feeding the body does nothing for the soul. A person's body is made from dirt. His soul is not. If a person gives all of his attention to satisfying his senses or feeding his body, he neglects the most important part of him, which can never find satisfaction in physical possessions or provisions. What a person eats, smells, sees, touches, or tastes can never give satisfaction to his soul, because those provisions are physical and his soul is not. His life becomes a never ending race in the dark, because he does not even know what he is seeking. The only way to satisfy the soul of a man is to bring it into a relationship with God. Therefore, great wealth without faith in God is vanity. It leaves a person empty and his life futile and vain.

Solomon asked, therefore, how is a man who is wise enough to accumulate a great fortune any better off than a fool who is always making mistakes and failing? Both are in a blind search for some object that will bring them contentment and neither of them is finding it, so the wise man is as bad off as the fool.

Solomon applied that same principle to a poor man. He asked how a poor man who knows how to relate well to other people and is able to gain their approval is any better off than a fool? The poor but

congenial man who is interested only in satisfying his mouth and his senses is in the same situation as the rich man who takes no note of God. He also is no better off than a fool. His seeking and striving also never ends, and contentment never comes. So the poor man who acts correctly is no better off than the man who acts foolishly.

Solomon was describing a reality about human existence that he had learned to recognize by careful observation of the human condition. What he observed has continued to be true to the human experience through all the years from Solomon's day until today. People who seek for satisfaction in money, possessions, and physical satisfactions are never content. They always are looking for something to fill an emptiness they cannot define. They either feel oppressed or depressed, or else they never release themselves from the drive to gain something they cannot define or find. Whether rich or poor, wise or foolish, they are all alike in their inability to be content.

Solomon closed his discussion of this vital insight with an enigmatic statement. He said, "Sight of eyes is better than a wandering soul." By "wandering soul" he evidently meant the unsatisfied soul to which he had been referring. He thought of a man who could not find contentment as having a soul that wanders about endlessly in search of something to fill the emptiness in his life. By "sight of eyes" he evidently meant seeing or finding that

for which the person is searching. His statement seems to mean that a person with a discontented or wandering soul knows his life would be much better if he could find what he is seeking. Therefore, he keeps on searching. Solomon did not go on to describe what would end that person's frustrating search and give him satisfaction. Instead he declared that the soul that is still wandering and has not seen what he longs for is living in vanity. He is grabbing at the wind.

Those who know God want to add to Solomon's words and inform the wandering soul that the way to see relief and find contentment is to trust and obey God. However, Solomon was not ready for that declaration. He was going to declare that truth at the end of his book (Eccl. 12:13-14), but first he wanted to help his readers understand why they needed to trust and obey God. To do so, he was exhausting his list of all the enticements that do not satisfy. Only then was he going to be ready to reveal where a person can find satisfaction. At this point, he was emphasizing that seeking for satisfaction in wealth is just one more empty vanity that will never satisfy.

Solomon's purpose in this whole section of his book was to emphasize that wealth and possessions will never give a person contentment. Seeking satisfaction from wealth and possessions is just another vanity, grabbing at the wind.