LESSON 6

The Cul-de-Sacs of Life

Ecclesiastes 6:1-12

In this lesson we discover the places where we'll never find ultimate joy and meaning in life.

OUTLINE

In our world it is easy to think vocation, success, education, or advancement will bring ultimate fulfillment. Solomon counters that idea by reminding us that this world is based on God's designs. While achievement is not inherently wrong, it can never ultimately satisfy.

I. Your Money Won't Bring Meaning to Your Life

A. Solomon's Insights

B. Solomon's Illustrations

II. You Won't Find Joy in Your Job

A. Your Job Can't Satisfy Your Soul

B. Your Mind Can't Replace Your Heart

C. Your Dreams Can't Replace Reality

III. You Won't Find Answers With Your Arguments

A. God Has Ordained Life as He Desires It to Be

B. Arguing With God Is an Exercise in Futility

C. God Is Willing to Bring Meaning to Your Life

D. God Alone Is in Charge of Your Future

OVERVIEW

People who win the lottery often wish they hadn't. Rosa Gayson of Washington won $400 a week for the rest of her life and ended up hiding in her apartment from all the people who wanted money. The whole McGugart family of New York won the Irish Sweepstakes when the father divided his millions with his sons. A year later, family members weren't speaking to each other. "It's the devil's own money," the mother concluded.

In the last lesson, we learned five important things about money and two important things about God. In Ecclesiastes 6:1-12 Solomon continues his discussion about money, but in a negative way: what happens if we try to earn and enjoy money apart from God.

Your Money Won't Bring Meaning to Your Life

A cul-de-sac is a dead-end street and there are three of them Solomon wants us to avoid. First: Money is not a source of meaning in life.



Solomon's Insights

Most Bible scholars believe Solomon is talking about himself in these first two verses, looking back on his own life. Being the wealthiest man on earth at the time in which he lived, he was qualified to say what one could and could not accomplish with money.

How did Solomon become so wealthy? The blessing of God. When he was twenty years old, the Lord appeared to him and offered him anything he might desire as the next king over Israel. Out of all the things Solomon might have asked for (what would you have requested?), Solomon asked for wisdom to judge and govern the people of Israel. Here is God's response to Solomon's request:

"Because this was in your heart, and you have not asked riches or wealth or honor or the life of your enemies, nor have you asked long life—but have asked wisdom and knowledge for yourself, that you may judge My people over whom I have made you king—wisdom and knowledge are granted to you; and I will give you riches and wealth and honor, such as none of the kings have had who were before you, nor shall any after you have the like" (2 Chronicles 1:11-12).

Solomon got what he asked for and more. That's how he became the wealthiest man in the world.

Solomon started out using his wealth wisely, building God a beautiful temple in Jerusalem. But soon his materialism gave him access to people of other cultures, and he took foreign wives and concubines—hundreds of them (1 Kings 11:3). Solomon allowed them to integrate their idolatry into the religion of Israel, and his heart was drawn away from God. This is possibly the experience Solomon is recollecting in Ecclesiastes 6:1-2.

In Ecclesiastes 5:19 Solomon wrote that money and the ability to enjoy it are gifts of God. That means the ability to use what you earn in meaningful ways in your life, not in wasteful or profligate ways, is a gift from God. When God is at the center of your life, He gives you the ability to use what He has given you in appropriate ways. When God was pushed to the side of Solomon's life, he started using his riches in self-serving ways.

Warren Wiersbe has written: "To enjoy the gifts without the Giver is idolatry, and this can never satisfy the human heart. Enjoyment without God is merely entertainment, and it doesn't satisfy. But enjoyment with God is enrichment and it brings true joy and satisfaction."

Solomon's Illustrations

Though Solomon touches on the issues of wealth and money several times in Ecclesiastes, the two illustrations in these verses are without equal in making his point that meaning is not to be found in money. His illustrations are at opposite extremes, one involving a man who lives 2,000 years and has 100 children, the other involving a child who dies at birth.

In the first illustration, Solomon employs hyperbole—exaggeration—to make his point. Methuselah is the oldest person recorded in the Bible, living 969 years. So Solomon pictures someone living twice that long (verse 6). Rehoboam, Solomon's son, had 88 children (2 Chronicles 11:21), but no one in the Bible had 100. Solomon is emphasizing the two things that indicated God's blessing in Judaism: years of life and large numbers of offspring.

But note what Solomon says about this apparently blessed man: "Indeed he has no burial" (verse 3). For a Jewish person not to have a well-attended and honorific burial was a great sign of disrespect (see the case of Jehoiakim; Jeremiah 22:18). So this man with plenty of money, a long life, and scores of children is disrespected at the end of his life. His money and his position apparently got him nothing at the end of his life because not even his children showed up to bury him. His money and prestige failed to deliver.

At the other end of the spectrum, a stillborn baby never sees the light of day: "It comes in vanity and departs in darkness, and its name is covered with darkness" (verse 4). Yet this baby and the prosperous man who lived 2,000 years both end up in the grave. "All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust" (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

Here is the very serious point Solomon is making with these illustrations: Living without God and without meaning in life is worse than never having been born at all. To get to the end of life without meaning and honor and respect, but with a lot of money, is worse than never having lived. This is a powerful conclusion Solomon comes to, one I hope you won't miss.

But don't misinterpret what he's saying. He's not saying it's wrong to be wealthy or to live a long and prosperous life. He is saying those things can't keep you from the grave; and if you get to the grave without God, you will have lived a meaningless life. Only God brings meaning to prosperity.

You Won't Find Joy in Your Job



The second way to get stuck in a dead end in life is to attach ultimate satisfaction to your job. Solomon isn't suggesting there is *no* satisfaction in work. Hopefully everyone enjoys the work they do. But to expect it to fulfill the ultimate part of your life is to ask more than it can deliver.

Your Job Can't Satisfy Your Soul

Everyone has to work hard, even go through stretches of long hours at the job. But if your job begins to dominate your life, you will go spiritually hungry. The message of Ecclesiastes is that God has hardwired mankind to be satisfied ultimately and only by Himself. If we look for satisfaction elsewhere, such as in our vocation, we will not find it.

When one of my grandsons came to stay at our house for the day, my wife got a small game device that plugged into the TV for him to use. When it wouldn't work, she asked me to take a look. While everything on the outside was in order—cables connected, switches turned "On"—it was lifeless.

I discovered that the batteries it needed were missing. As soon as we added power on the inside, it worked fine.

Life is often like that little game. We act like everything is okay, and on the outside everything is. We're plugged in, we're turned "On"—but because that God-shaped part of our life is filled with work or money or some other false filler, there's no power. Building a great and rewarding career without God in the middle of it is dangerous work. It can even be true in the ministry. We can leave God out of building a huge church as easily as building a huge company.

Your Mind Can't Replace Your Heart

Education falls into the same category. The greatest education, devoid of God, leaves us on the same level as a fool. When the wise man and the fool stand before God, He isn't going to inquire about education or wealth or status or the things we think are so important. He's only going to care about whether we know Him. So don't let your mind replace your heart.

Your Dreams Can't Replace Reality

Verse 9 is Solomon's version of "better is a bird in the hand than two in the bush." Dreaming is good until it separates us from reality, and we start living in a fantasy world. The person who lives in the future never gets around to enjoying today. Everything is always being put off until we get more money, more time, more education. When people like this finally get it all together, they find they've missed the best years of their life.

All the way through this book, Solomon tells us to enjoy the life that God has given; and do it today. Don't let fantasies about the future keep you from experiencing the reality of today. Solomon may have glimpsed a measure of how to do this from his father, King David. In David's Psalm 16, he concluded, "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (verse 11).

David understood what it means to find pleasure in the person of God.

You Won't Find Answers With Your Arguments

Solomon anticipated that there would be arguments about this idea that life is meaningless without God. Therefore, he gives us four truths about life and God that suggest it is vain to argue with God.

God Has Ordained Life as He Desires It to Be

Riches and vocation and education all fail to bring happiness because of the ordinances of God. God dictates the incapacity of worldly things to bring meaning and enjoyment to our life. Could He have designed the world so that ultimate fulfillment came from accumulating money? Yes, He could have. He could have designed the world so that workaholism was the key to happiness . . . or education . . . or power and prestige. But He chose not to do that. He designed a world that needs work, money, and education but which is not dependent on them for meaning. That's just the way this God-designed world works.

Arguing With God Is an Exercise in Futility

Solomon says we can't contend with "Him who is mightier than [we]." It's foolish and fruitless to contend with God about the meaning of life. Paul says in Romans 9:21, "Does not the potter have power over the clay?" And the answer is "Yes." He's the Creator and we are the creatures. It is entirely inappropriate for us to raise ourselves up against God and challenge that which He has decided to do. Jesus said that life from God is meant to be abundant (John 10:10b), but that abundance must be enjoyed on His terms.

God Is Willing to Bring Meaning to Your Life

A rhetorical question in verse 12a has an obvious answer: Only God knows what is best for man "all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow." And to find out what is best for your life, you have to get in touch with God. You won't find what is best for you at work, at the bank, or at the university. You'll only find it in God.

God Alone Is in Charge of Your Future

The last rhetorical question has the same obvious answer: God. Only God knows "what will happen" in anyone's life. That's why He is worthy to be trusted. He sees around all the corners that are just blind turns to us.

Solomon's strategy in this last section is so very logical. He says life is like it is because God created it that way. Don't waste your time arguing with Him because you won't win. He's God and we're not. If you want meaning in life, go to God. If you want security for the future, go to God. Do you want to pursue your career? Try to do well for your family? Get an advanced degree? Fine—no problem. God is for all those things as long as you keep Him in the center of your world.

A man who lost everything in the wildfires in our area told me he was given only a few minutes to collect things from his house before fleeing. He's an engineer, so he grabbed a couple of engineering books. And he grabbed his Bible and a devotional book he was reading. The books he rescued represent the priority and balance Solomon is looking for in life. Work, vocation, education, and God in the midst of everything.

Keep that balance yourself and you'll always find the true meaning of life.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. What are the three cul-de-sacs of life that Solomon wants us to avoid?
   -
   -
   -

   a. Have you ever ended up in one of these cul-de-sacs of life? If so, which one?

   b. Explain how God led you out of that dead end.

2. What parts of life, that aren't God, have you tried to find meaning in? How did that end up working out?

   a. List the priorities in your life. Are these priorities in order, according to God's Word?

3. How can you practice, or encourage those close to you to practice, keeping God in the middle of your:

   a. Work life

   b. Family life

   c. Financial life

4. Read Ecclesiastes 6:10-12. What four truths does Solomon give us that suggest it is vain to argue with God? Elaborate on each.
   -
   -
   -
   -

   a. Have you ever tried arguing with God? Over what? What was the outcome?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the following questions as a group:

a. What insight did Solomon offer on money in Ecclesiastes 6:1-2?

b. What illustration does he use to describe this? (Ecclesiastes 6:3-6)

c. What was the cultural context of this illustration?

d. What idea was Solomon trying to portray?

e. What examples can you think of in history, or in your own lives, when money failed to deliver?

f. What is the only thing that gives meaning to your life? Why?

g. What happens if we try to earn and enjoy money apart from God?

h. Why is it easy to believe money is the answer to all of life's problems?

i. Why is it also dangerous to fall into this belief?

2. Is it easy to sometimes mentally live in the future? Why or why not?

   a. List some examples of thinking that show one is focusing more on the future than the present.

   b. Why does Solomon urge us against this in Ecclesiastes 6:9?

   c. How does Psalm 16:11 parallel this idea?

DID YOU KNOW?

As testimony to the importance of burial as an act of honor and reverence in the Old Testament, we may cite the burials of Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and others. When Jacob was dying in Egypt, he made his sons promise to bury his body in Canaan where his grandfather, Abraham (and Sarah), and his father, Isaac (and Rebekah), and his own wife, Leah, were buried. Pharaoh granted the sons of Jacob permission to leave Egypt and bury Jacob in Canaan. All of Egypt mourned for seventy days at the passing of the Hebrew patriarch. The journey to Canaan to bury Jacob included not only all his sons and their families but dignitaries and officials from Pharaoh's court. "It was a very great gathering"—a sign of the respect accorded a man rich in years, children, and reputation.