

Eccl. 5:10-6:9, Qohelet's View of Wealth

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A. Overview

The passage has simple chiastic structure.

1. The outer two sections, 5:10-17 and 6:1-9, emphasize the futility of trusting in riches. They combine two themes, not quite in chiastic order:
 - a) Dissatisfaction: Wealth does not bring satisfaction.
 - b) Loss: It is easily lost.
2. In the center, 5:18-20, we are reminded to seek our satisfaction in God alone.

B. 5:10-17, The Futility of Wealth

1. 5:10-12, Dissatisfaction

We have a statement of the thesis, followed by two reasons.

- a) Statement, 10. Those who love something are not really satisfied with it. This is Pascal's observation about the hunter, *Pensees* 135, 139.
- b) Reasons, 11-12
 - 1) It attracts expenses. "In an old house, every room has a hole in the corner into which you stuff money." You never get to enjoy it, just watch it go by. The faster it comes in, the faster it goes out.
 - 2) It generates cares in watching over it. Have to guard it; worry about someone stealing it. The poor lost no sleep over the stock market crash last fall.

2. 5:13-16, Loss

Note similar opening line to 6:1.

- a) 13-15, The specific case: riches pass away.
 - 1) 13 retranslate: "wealth [singular] guarded by its owners [plural] to its hurt." Irony: one typically guards something to protect it *from* hurt (Ps. 121:7). Here, owners guard it (as just described in v.12) only to lose it.
 - 2) 14, the wealth perishes in the course of, while he undergoes, evil labor, (NYN R(. This is the recurring complaint in Eccl: 1:13; 4:8.
 - 3) 15, as a result, he leaves the world as naked as he came. Recurring theme: Job 1:21; 1 Tim. 6:7.
- b) 16, Generalization: in *all* points as he came, so shall he go. Not just impoverished, but lacking any benefit of his

labors.

3. 5:17, Back to Dissatisfaction

Even when he can consume his riches ("eateth"), his life is marked by sorrow, wrath, sickness--like a man eating in a dark dungeon. He can hardly be said to enjoy it.

C. 5:18-20, The Believer's Portion

1. 18,19 are parallel, the second expanding the scope of the first. Present the parallel things first (eat, enjoy, in labor, gift of God), then point out the contrast.

a) The object: enjoy good.

b) The situation: in (the course of) labor.

c) The agent: It is God's gift to be able to do this. As he has just showed, wealth cannot guarantee it, and often works in the opposite direction!

d) The patient: "I"/"also every man." What 18 presents as a personal discovery is repeated in 19 as a universal heritage. Translate 19, "Also every man: That God gives ... this is the gift of God."

2. 20, this joy is God's answer to the toil of life, and helps remove its sting. The unsaved seek relief in intoxication; the believer has God's joy. Contrast this verse with v.17. The difference is the gift of God.

D. 6:1-9, The Futility of Wealth

Note similar opening line to 5:13.

1. 1-6, Two Case Histories

a) 2, Loss

1) He has everything he could want.

2) Yet God does not enable him to enjoy it (cf. 5:19, where God does give this ability).

3) Instead, someone else comes along and enjoys it, someone who has not worked for it.

b) 3-6, Dissatisfaction

This section shows the futility of dissatisfaction by comparing it with death at both ends of life: at the beginning (a stillborn child), and at the end. In each case we have a statement of the person's dissatisfaction, followed by the comparison.

1) 3a, his experience.

The image here could well be that of a despotic ruler, overthrown at the last by a coup. Solomon knows well the standards of royalty in his day. For a relevant example, though from a much later period, see the recent National Geographic article on Suleiman the Magnificent.

a> He gains a lot
1> Long life
2> Many children
3> Powerful: "and be as great as the days of his years"

b> Yet he cannot enjoy it
1> Soul not filled, lit. satisfied, with good
2> No burial (result of being overthrown)

2) 3b-5, his comparison: to a stillborn child.
The ruler's experience of life is characterized by frustration and the prospect of desire without satisfaction. The child knows neither desire nor satisfaction. The child actually has more rest than the ruler!

3) 6a, his experience: lives two thousand years (or perhaps a million, following the rabbinic interpretation), yet without seeing good.

4) 6b, "all go to one place," that is, the grave (cf. 3:20).
What good is a long life, which must one day end anyway, if it does not lead to satisfaction?

2. 7-8, General Conclusion (focusing on dissatisfaction)
Again chiastic: question in the middle, answer on the outside.

a) 8a, question. In the light of all this, how is the wise man better off than the fool? What advantage does human wisdom convey?

b) Answer:

- 1) 7, phrased as a statement: They are alike, in that neither one can be satisfied.
- 2) 8b, phrased as a question: Thus the wise man's only advantage is whatever a poor wise man has. There is a difference, but it does not convey any material advantage.
- 3) This is a great advance over the Jewish view that wisdom brings wealth (rather than the Biblical view that God gives both). Decouples wisdom from prosperity.

E. Summary

Consider three things: Wisdom, Wealth, and Satisfaction.

1. The world considers that these are causally coupled.
 - a) If you are wise enough, you will be wealthy.
 - b) If you are wealthy, that will bring satisfaction.

2. Qohelet's insight is that they are independent. Each is a separate gift of God. You can have any one, or even any two, without having the rest. So the proper attitude is to enjoy what God does give rather than being frustrated over what he has not given.