

CRAWFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

BIBLE STUDY

Ecclesiastes Chapter 6 — The Vanity of Wealth and the Limits of Human Desire

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford Standard Bible

Introduction

Ecclesiastes Chapter 6 continues the Preacher's examination of wealth, enjoyment, desire, and the limits of human life.

In Chapter 5, he explained that:

Wealth can increase.

Wealth can disappear.

Possessions cannot be carried beyond death.

And the ability to enjoy what we have is itself a gift from God.

Chapter 6 develops that truth even further.

The Preacher describes a man who possesses:

Riches.

Wealth.

Honor.

Everything his heart desires.

Yet something is missing.

He cannot enjoy any of it.

That is one of the great tragedies of this chapter.

A person may possess much and enjoy little.

Another may possess little and live with deep contentment.

The chapter also examines the endless nature of human desire.

A person works to satisfy his appetite.

But the appetite returns.

He eats.

Then becomes hungry again.

He earns.

Then wants more.

He achieves.

Then seeks another accomplishment.

The eyes continually wander toward what is still missing.

The Preacher therefore gives a powerful principle:

“Better what the eyes see than the roving of desire.”

In other words:

It is better to appreciate what is already in your hands than to spend your entire life longing for something else.

The chapter closes by emphasizing human limitation.

We do not control everything.

We cannot contend successfully with God.

We do not know completely what is best for us.

We do not know everything that will happen after us.

Our lives are brief.

Like a shadow.

Like a vapor.

Ecclesiastes 6 therefore confronts the illusion that:

More wealth.

More years.

More possessions.

More achievement.

Will automatically produce more happiness.

The central truth of Ecclesiastes 6 is:

Wealth, long life, and endless desire cannot satisfy the human heart apart from God, and true wisdom begins when we accept our limits and receive life with gratitude and contentment.

I. AN EVIL COMMON AMONG HUMANITY

Ecclesiastes 6:1 — A Tragedy Under the Sun

“There is an evil I have seen under the sun, and it is common among mankind.”

The Preacher introduces another painful reality.

This is not a rare problem.

He says it is:

Common.

People frequently possess things they cannot truly enjoy.

They have what others envy.

But they do not have contentment.

Cross References

Ecclesiastes 5:13

I have seen a painful evil under the sun: wealth that a person stores up can actually bring harm to the person who owns it.

Job 21:7

Why do wicked people sometimes continue living, grow old, and become increasingly powerful and prosperous?

Psalms 73:12

Look at the wicked. They often seem free from trouble while their wealth continues to increase.

Spiritual Principle

Visible prosperity does not prove inward satisfaction.

Key Truth

You can possess what others want and still lack what your own soul needs.

II. WEALTH WITHOUT THE POWER TO ENJOY IT

Ecclesiastes 6:2 — A Stranger Enjoys the Wealth

“A man may have riches, wealth, and honor, so that he lacks nothing his heart desires, yet God does not give him the power to enjoy it—a stranger enjoys them instead. This is vanity, a grievous evil.”

This person appears to have everything.

Riches.

Wealth.

Honor.

Nothing materially seems missing.

Yet he lacks one crucial gift:

The ability to enjoy what he possesses.

The Preacher shows us that possession and enjoyment are not the same thing.

Cross References

Luke 12:20

God said to the rich man, “You foolish man! Tonight your life will be required from you. Then who will receive everything you have prepared and stored up?”

Job 27:17

The wicked person may collect clothing, but someone righteous may eventually wear it, and the silver he gathered may be divided among others.

Psalms 39:6

People hurry through life like passing shadows, gathering possessions anxiously, yet they do not know who will finally receive what they have accumulated.

Spiritual Principle

The ability to enjoy a blessing is itself a blessing.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Do not merely ask:

“What do I own?”

Also ask:

“Can I receive it with gratitude and peace?”

III. LONG LIFE WITHOUT SATISFACTION

Ecclesiastes 6:3 — Many Children, Many Years, No Joy

“A man may have a hundred children and live many years, but if he finds no satisfaction in life, and does not even receive an honorable burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.”

The Preacher uses deliberately shocking language.

In the ancient world:

Many children.

Long life.

An honorable burial.

Were all regarded as signs of great blessing.

But the Preacher says even these things do not guarantee a meaningful life.

If a person lives for many years and never enjoys the life God gave him, the length of his life alone does not make that life satisfying.

Cross References

Job 3:16

Why was I not like a child who never came to full birth, hidden away and never brought into the light?

Job 3:11

Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not pass away as soon as I came from my mother's womb?

Psalms 17:14

Some people receive their entire portion from this present life. Their stomachs are filled with earthly treasure, their children are many, and they leave their possessions to the next generation.

Spiritual Principle

A long life is not automatically a fulfilled life.

Application

Do not merely ask God for more years.

Ask Him for wisdom to live the years He gives you well.

IV. A LIFE THAT PASSES INTO OBSCURITY

Ecclesiastes 6:4 — Futility and Darkness

“For it comes in futility and departs in darkness, and its name is shrouded in obscurity.”

The Preacher continues his comparison with the stillborn child.

Its life never develops into earthly experience.

Its name fades into obscurity.

The language is somber because the Preacher is emphasizing rest from the frustration experienced by the unsatisfied person.

Cross References

Job 10:21

Before I go to the place from which I will not return, to the land of deep darkness and shadow,

Job 18:17

The memory of the wicked person disappears from the earth, and his name is no longer remembered in the land.

Psalms 109:13

May his descendants be cut off, and may his family name disappear from memory in the next generation.

Spiritual Principle

Human fame is temporary.

Obscurity eventually comes to nearly every earthly name.

V. REST WITHOUT EARTHLY STRIVING

Ecclesiastes 6:5 — More Rest Than the Unsatisfied Man

“It never sees the sun or knows anything, yet it finds more rest than that man.”

The Preacher contrasts earthly striving with rest.

The unsatisfied man may live for years.

Yet he is restless.

The stillborn child never enters the struggles of life under the sun.

The point is not that life has no value.

The point is that life without contentment can become deeply miserable.

Cross References

Job 10:18

Why did You bring me out of the womb? I wish I had died before anyone ever saw me.

Job 10:19

Then I would have been as though I had never existed, carried directly from the womb to the grave.

Psalms 58:8

May the wicked disappear like a child who never reaches birth and never sees the light of the sun.

Spiritual Principle

Length of life cannot replace peace of heart.

VI. EVEN TWO THOUSAND YEARS CANNOT DEFEAT DEATH

Ecclesiastes 6:6 — The Same Destination

“Even if he lives a thousand years twice over, but does not enjoy life, do not all go to the same place?”

The Preacher exaggerates the length of life to make his point.

Imagine someone living:

Two thousand years.

If those years contain no true enjoyment, what has extraordinary longevity accomplished?

Death still comes.

Cross References

Psalms 49:10

Everyone can see that wise people die. Foolish and senseless people also perish, leaving their wealth behind to others.

Ecclesiastes 2:16

Neither the wise person nor the fool will be remembered forever. Eventually both will be forgotten, and both must die.

Job 21:23

One person dies while still strong, prosperous, comfortable, and secure.

Spiritual Principle

More years do not automatically create more meaning.

Key Truth

It is better to live wisely than merely to live long.

VII. THE APPETITE IS NEVER FINALLY SATISFIED

Ecclesiastes 6:7 — Labor for the Mouth

“All a man’s labor is for his mouth, yet his appetite is never satisfied.”

People work in order to meet needs.

Food.

Shelter.

Clothing.

Comfort.

But many desires continually renew themselves.

You eat today.

Tomorrow you are hungry again.

You buy something.

Later you desire something else.

You achieve a goal.

Soon another goal appears.

Cross References

Proverbs 16:26

A worker’s hunger motivates him to keep working, because his own appetite pushes him onward.

Isaiah 55:2

Why spend your money on what cannot truly satisfy you, and why labor for what does not nourish your soul? Listen carefully to Me and receive what is truly good.

Ecclesiastes 1:8

Everything can become wearisome beyond words. The eye never reaches complete satisfaction from seeing, and the ear is never completely filled by hearing.

Spiritual Principle

Human desire renews itself faster than earthly possessions can satisfy it.

VIII. WHAT ADVANTAGE DOES WISDOM PROVIDE?

Ecclesiastes 6:8 — Wise, Foolish, Rich, and Poor

“What advantage has the wise over the fool? What does the poor man gain by knowing how to conduct himself before others?”

The Preacher again asks about lasting advantage.

Wisdom certainly has value.

But from the limited viewpoint of life under the sun, both wise and foolish people remain mortal.

The poor person may behave wisely and skillfully among others, yet he still faces human limitations.

Cross References

Ecclesiastes 2:15

Then I said to myself, “If the fool’s end will also become my end, what lasting advantage have I gained from becoming so wise?” I concluded that this too was frustrating when viewed only under the sun.

Proverbs 19:1

It is better to be poor and live with integrity than to speak dishonestly and behave foolishly.

Ecclesiastes 4:13

A poor but wise young person is better than an old and foolish king who has become unwilling to listen to correction.

Spiritual Principle

Wisdom improves how we live, but it does not remove every limitation of life.

IX. ENJOY WHAT IS PRESENT

Ecclesiastes 6:9 — Better What the Eyes See

“Better what the eyes see than the roving of desire. This too is vanity and chasing after the wind.”

This is one of the most practical verses in Ecclesiastes.

The Preacher says:

Enjoy what is actually before you.

Instead of constantly allowing desire to wander toward:

What you do not own.

Where you have not gone.

What you have not achieved.

Who you wish you were.

The wandering desire is never satisfied.

Cross References

Proverbs 27:20

Death and destruction are never satisfied, and human eyes are never completely satisfied either.

1 John 2:16

Everything associated with this fallen world—the desires of the flesh, the desire for what the eyes see, and pride in possessions and achievement—does not come from the Father but from the world.

Matthew 6:22

The eye is like a lamp for the body. If your eye is healthy and focused properly, your whole life will be filled with light.

Spiritual Principle

Contentment begins when we stop living mentally somewhere else.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Enjoy what God has placed in your hand instead of exhausting yourself over what remains beyond your reach.

X. HUMANITY CANNOT CONTEND WITH GOD

Ecclesiastes 6:10 — One Stronger Than Man

“Whatever exists has already been named; and what man is has been known. He cannot contend with one who is stronger than he.”

The Preacher emphasizes human limitation.

Human beings do not define reality.

God does.

We are:

Created.

Limited.

Mortal.

Dependent.

We cannot argue God out of being God.

Cross References

Genesis 2:19

The Lord God formed the animals and birds from the ground and brought them to Adam to see what he would call them, and whatever Adam called each living creature became its name.

Job 9:32

God is not merely another man like me, so I cannot answer Him as though we were equals standing together in court.

Isaiah 45:9

How terrible for the person who argues with the One who made him. A piece of pottery cannot reasonably fight with the potter. Can the clay say to the one shaping it, “What are you making?”

Spiritual Principle

Wisdom begins when humanity recognizes that God is God and we are not.

XI. MORE WORDS DO NOT CREATE MORE MEANING

Ecclesiastes 6:11 — Multiplying Words and Vanity

“The more words, the more vanity—and what profit is there to man?”

Human beings can talk endlessly about life.

Debate.

Speculate.

Argue.

Explain.

But many words do not give us control over reality.

The Preacher has already warned against multiplying speech carelessly.

Cross References

Ecclesiastes 1:2

“Utterly temporary and fleeting,” says the Preacher. “Everything under the sun becomes empty when treated as the final meaning of life.”

Ecclesiastes 12:12

My son, be warned about endlessly adding to words and writings. There is no end to making many books, and excessive study can exhaust the body.

Psalms 39:6

People pass through life like shadows. They become anxious over temporary things, gathering possessions without knowing who will finally receive them.

Spiritual Principle

More discussion does not necessarily produce more wisdom.

XII. HUMAN LIFE PASSES LIKE A SHADOW

Ecclesiastes 6:12 — Who Knows What Is Best?

“For who knows what is good for a person in life, during the few days of his vain life which pass like a shadow? Who can tell him what will happen under the sun after he is gone?”

The chapter ends with two questions.

Who truly knows what is best?

Who knows what happens after us?

Human understanding is limited.

We often assume:

“I know what I need.”

“I know what would make me happy.”

“I know what should happen.”

But God sees farther than we do.

Cross References

Job 8:9

We were born only yesterday and know very little, because our days on earth pass quickly like a shadow.

Psalm 144:4

A human being is like a breath, and his days pass away like a moving shadow.

James 4:14

You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. Your life is like a mist that appears briefly and then disappears.

Spiritual Principle

Human limitation should lead to humility and dependence upon God.

Key Truth

Because life is brief and the future is hidden, we should trust the One who sees both.

XIII. SIX GREAT LESSONS FROM ECCLESIASTES 6

1. Wealth Without Enjoyment Is Empty

A person may have everything materially.

Yet he may still lack joy.

Principle:

Possession is not the same thing as satisfaction.

2. Long Life Without Contentment Is Still Empty

Many years do not automatically make a meaningful life.

Principle:

The quality of a life lived with God matters more than simply adding years.

3. Human Desire Is Difficult to Satisfy

The appetite keeps returning.

The eyes continue wandering.

Principle:

Unchecked desire always creates another reason to feel dissatisfied.

4. Contentment Values What Is Present

It is better to appreciate what is already before you than to live continually longing for something else.

Principle:

Gratitude looks at what God has given; envy looks at what God has given someone else.

5. Humanity Has Limits

We cannot control:

Death.

The future.

Every circumstance.

God.

Principle:

Peace grows when we stop trying to control what belongs to God.

6. Life Is Brief

Our days pass like:

A shadow.

A mist.

A breath.

Principle:

Because life is short, do not spend it endlessly wanting another life.

XIV. WHAT ECCLESIASTES 6 TEACHES ABOUT WEALTH

Wealth may provide:

Comfort.

Options.

Opportunity.

Security in certain earthly matters.

But wealth cannot guarantee:

Joy.

Peace.

Contentment.

Health.

Long life.

Eternal meaning.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The greatest tragedy is not having little.

It is having much and still being unable to enjoy anything.

XV. WHAT ECCLESIASTES 6 TEACHES ABOUT CONTENTMENT

Contentment looks at what the eyes presently see and says:

“This is what God has placed before me today.”

Discontent continually wanders.

It says:

“If only.”

If only I had:

More money.

A different house.

A different job.

More recognition.

More possessions.

A different situation.

Then I would be happy.

But when one desire is fulfilled, another often appears.

Spiritual Principle

Contentment is learning to stop moving the finish line.

XVI. WHAT ECCLESIASTES 6 TEACHES ABOUT DESIRE

Desire itself is not always sinful.

We may rightly desire:

Wisdom.

Righteousness.

Service.

Growth.

Better circumstances.

But unchecked desire becomes:

Restless.

Greedy.

Comparative.

Impossible to satisfy.

Key Truth

The problem is not simply wanting something.

The problem is believing:

“I cannot have joy until I get it.”

XVII. WHAT ECCLESIASTES 6 TEACHES ABOUT LIFE’S LENGTH

The Preacher imagines someone living:

A thousand years.

Then another thousand.

Even two thousand years would not provide meaning if the person never learned to enjoy life rightly.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

More time cannot repair a heart that refuses gratitude.

XVIII. WHAT ECCLESIASTES 6 TEACHES ABOUT HUMAN LIMITATION

People want control.

We want to control:

Outcomes.

Possessions.

Time.

Health.

The future.

Other people.

But life repeatedly reminds us:

We are limited.

God is not.

Spiritual Principle

Humility is not weakness.

It is recognizing reality.

XIX. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Question 1

What evil does the Preacher describe in verses 1–2?

He describes a person who has:

Riches.

Wealth.

Honor.

Everything he desires.

Yet he cannot enjoy any of it.

Question 2

Why is the ability to enjoy wealth important?

Because possession alone cannot create satisfaction.

Enjoyment requires a grateful and contented heart.

Question 3

Why does the Preacher mention someone with a hundred children?

He is using an extreme example of what ancient society considered great blessing and success.

Yet even enormous family prosperity cannot replace contentment.

Question 4

Why does he compare the unsatisfied person to a stillborn child?

He is emphasizing the tragedy of living many years without ever finding rest or satisfaction.

The comparison is intentionally severe.

Question 5

What does verse 6 teach about long life?

Even extraordinary longevity cannot provide lasting meaning if a person never learns to enjoy life rightly.

Question 6

What does verse 7 teach about appetite?

Human needs and desires continually return.

Satisfying one appetite today does not permanently satisfy it.

Question 7

What does “the roving of desire” mean?

It describes the heart constantly wandering toward what it does not have.

Instead of enjoying present blessings, it continually searches for something else.

Question 8

What does verse 9 teach about contentment?

It teaches that appreciating what is already before us is better than constantly desiring what we do not possess.

Question 9

What does verse 10 teach about God?

God is greater than humanity.

Human beings cannot successfully contend with their Creator as though they were His equal.

Question 10

Why does the Preacher say more words can increase vanity?

Because endless talking, reasoning, and speculation do not remove human limitations or give us control over life.

Question 11

Why is life compared with a shadow?

Because life passes quickly.

A shadow appears.

Moves.

And disappears.

Human life is similarly brief.

Question 12

What should Ecclesiastes 6 change about the way we live?

It should teach us to:

Reject greed.

Practice contentment.

Enjoy present blessings.

Accept human limitations.

Stop living through endless “if only” thinking.

Trust God with the future.

Use our brief lives wisely.

XX. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Ecclesiastes 6 asks several searching questions.

Am I Able to Enjoy What I Already Have?

Or am I always waiting for something more?

Have My Desires Become Endless?

When one desire is fulfilled, do I immediately replace it with another?

Do I Believe Wealth Will Make Me Content?

How much would actually be enough?

Am I Missing Present Blessings?

What has God already given me that I have stopped noticing?

Am I Constantly Comparing My Life with Another Person's Life?

Has comparison stolen gratitude?

Am I Trying to Control What Belongs to God?

Can I trust Him with the future?

Am I Living as Though My Life Were Permanent?

Do my priorities reflect how brief life actually is?

XXI. A CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Do Not Spend Today Wanting Tomorrow’s Life”

One of the greatest dangers of discontentment is that it steals the present.

A person says:

I will be happy:

When I have more money.

When I reach another goal.

When my circumstances change.

When I own something different.

When someone finally recognizes me.

But life keeps moving.

Today disappears while we wait for tomorrow to make us happy.

Principle:

Do not sacrifice the blessings already in your hands while reaching endlessly for blessings you do not yet possess.

XXII. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN NEED AND DESIRE

Human beings have legitimate needs.

Food.

Shelter.

Rest.

Relationships.

But desire can continually expand beyond need.

What began as:

“I need enough.”

Can become:

“I need more than someone else.”

Then:

“I need more than I had yesterday.”

Then:

“I still do not have enough.”

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The heart that never defines “enough” can never experience contentment.

XXIII. WEALTH, JOY, AND GOD’S GIFT

Ecclesiastes 6 should be read alongside the end of Ecclesiastes 5.

Chapter 5 teaches that God gives:

Wealth.

Possessions.

And:

The ability to enjoy them.

Chapter 6 describes what happens when a person has the first two but not the third.

The lesson is profound.

Joy cannot be manufactured merely by increasing possessions.

Key Truth

Sometimes the greater blessing is not receiving more.

It is receiving the grace to enjoy what you already have.

XXIV. THE LIMITS OF HUMAN CONTROL

The chapter closes by confronting human pride.

We do not know:

Everything that is good for us.

Everything that will happen tomorrow.

Everything that will happen after we die.

We cannot:

Control every outcome.

Guarantee every plan.

Preserve every possession.

Extend life indefinitely.

Spiritual Principle

Life becomes less exhausting when we stop trying to perform God's job.

XXV. FINAL APPLICATION

Ecclesiastes Chapter 6 gives us a direct warning about the danger of living with an unsatisfied heart.

A person may have:

Money.

Honor.

Family.

Long life.

Achievement.

Possessions.

And still say:

“It is not enough.”

That is the tragedy of endless desire.

There will always be:

Something else to buy.

Somewhere else to go.

Another accomplishment.

Another comparison.

Another reason to delay contentment.

But the Preacher says:

“Better what the eyes see than the roving of desire.”

Look at what God has already placed before you.

Do not overlook:

Today.

Your present work.

Your present relationships.

Your present provision.

Your present opportunities.

Your present blessings.

Because life is passing.

Like a shadow.

Like a mist.

Like a breath.

That does not mean we should never pursue improvement.

It means improvement cannot become the condition for gratitude.

You can desire growth and still be thankful now.

You can pursue goals and still enjoy today.

You can work toward tomorrow without despising the present.

Ecclesiastes 6 also reminds us of our limits.

We are not God.

We cannot control everything.

We cannot determine every outcome.

We cannot guarantee the future.

But we can trust the One who does know the future.

Therefore:

Hold wealth loosely.

Hold plans humbly.

Hold desires carefully.

Receive blessings gratefully.

Stop comparing constantly.

Stop chasing an imaginary life that always exists somewhere else.

Do not wait until you have more before you begin thanking God.

Look around.

Recognize His provision.

Use what He has given.

Enjoy what He allows.

Serve faithfully.

And remember:

The richest person is not always the one who owns the most.

Sometimes the richest person is the one who has learned to say:

“What God has given me today is enough for me to be grateful.”

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for the wisdom of Your Word.

Teach us to recognize the emptiness of wealth without contentment.

Protect us from believing that possessions alone can make us happy.

When we begin to think that more money will solve every problem, remind us that the human heart needs more than money.

Give us the ability to enjoy what You have already provided.

Protect us from restless desire.

Keep our eyes from constantly wandering toward what others possess.

Help us appreciate what is already before us.

Teach us to recognize:

Enough.

Give us contentment.

Give us gratitude.

Give us peace.

Father, help us use the days You give us wisely.

Whether our lives are long or short, may they be filled with faithfulness to You.

Keep us from wasting our years chasing what cannot satisfy.

When our desires begin controlling us, bring our hearts back to You.

When comparison steals our joy, remind us of Your personal care for us.

When we want someone else's life, teach us to receive the life You have given us.

Father, remind us that we are limited.

We do not know everything.

We cannot control everything.

We cannot see the whole future.

But You can.

Help us trust You with what we cannot know.

Help us trust You with what we cannot change.

Help us trust You with tomorrow.

Our lives pass quickly.

Teach us not to waste them.

May we live with gratitude.

May we work with purpose.

May we enjoy Your blessings.

May we hold possessions lightly.

May we seek Your wisdom.

May we be satisfied in You.

And when our earthly lives have passed like a shadow, may we have spent them pursuing what truly matters.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Key Verse

“Better what the eyes see than the roving of desire. This too is vanity and chasing after the wind.” — Ecclesiastes 6:9

Central Truth

Wealth, long life, achievement, and endless desire cannot satisfy the human heart apart from God; true contentment comes when we gratefully receive what He provides, accept our limitations, and trust Him with the future.

Ecclesiastes 6 in One Sentence

The Preacher shows that riches without enjoyment, long life without contentment, and endless desire all lead to emptiness, while wisdom teaches us to appreciate present blessings, accept human limits, and entrust our brief future to God.