

Occupied with Joy (Eccl. 5:8–20)

By Jacob Gerber

After considering how we relate to God, the Preacher again turns to consider our relationship to the rest of the world. In the second half of Ecclesiastes 5, the Preacher evaluates the vanity that exists in the sphere of public justice (or, rather, injustice), as well as vanity of toiling to accumulate wealth in this world in our private occupations. Public and private, there is no place in this world where we can find something solid and secure to establish a foundation for our security and satisfaction. Nevertheless, the Preacher does not write off life altogether; rather, he counsels us instead to seek joy and satisfaction that comes not from anything in this life, but from receiving everything as a gift from God’s hand. In Ecclesiastes 5:8–20, the Preacher exhorts us to learn experientially that *God provides paradoxical joy*.

Public Injustice (Eccl. 5:8–9)

While the two verses in Ecclesiastes 5:8–9 are difficult to translate, their general sense is clear: the Preacher is observing ongoing breakdowns in public life. First, in v. 8, the Preacher deals with breakdowns public justice, in the “oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness.” Then, the Preacher tells us that we should not be “amazed at the matter,” since there is a system where the public justice administer by a high official is “watched by” [שמר; *shamar*] a higher official, with other higher officials watching over those officials. In perfect consistency with the rest of the book, the Preacher is drawing our attention to one more facet of the vanity that we experience in our lives under the sun. Still, the Preacher does not tell us the conclusion that we ought to draw from this, or from the system of “high” and “higher officials” charged with the oversight of this justice system.

Commentators have offered numerous suggestions. Murphy suggests that the Preacher could be offering an assurance that the system of oversight will correct problems with justice, but he personally believes that the Preacher is warning us not to be surprised when such a bureaucracy will inevitably tend toward corruption.¹ Miller offers two options for a negative interpretation of these high and higher officials: either the Preacher is skeptical of their ability to do anything, or the Preacher is blaming them for the injustice that they are charged with preventing.² Kidner takes a similarly pessimistic view, but sees a resigned acknowledgement that such a system of bureaucratic oversight is better than the anarchy of no government at all.³ Shaw raises the question of whether the second description of even “higher” officials (“for the high official is watched by a higher, and there

¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.

² Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 104.

³ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 55.

are yet *higher ones* over them”) is actually a hint pointing to the final justice accomplished by the highest official, the Judge of all the earth—although he is careful to note that, if this is an “implied encouragement to believe that God will sort everything out in the end...it is not explicit.”⁴ Bridges largely agrees, drawing this conclusion: “Yet this verse falls in with one great object of the Book, which is to compose the minds of the servants of God to stillness and confidence under his inscrutable dispensations.”⁵

One of the main problems of interpreting verse 8, though, is in trying to find a satisfactory explanation that connects with what the Preacher writes next, in v. 9: “But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.” Once again, this is a very difficult verse to translate. Very literally, the last phrase is, “a king for a field served/cultivated.” The difficulty is in determining whether “served/cultivated” [עבד; *abad*] refers to the king (“a king is served by the field”) or to the field (“a king for/over a cultivated field”).⁶ If we take the first meaning, we mean that the king’s power is dependent upon the production of the field, since even the king cannot produce food by the force of his command.⁷ Or, if we take the second meaning, this verse recognizes the proper role of a king for ensuring that public justice and infrastructure so that the people can freely and confidently cultivate their fields, for the flourishing of the whole civilization.⁸ In context with v. 8, this second meaning may further suggest the idea that the king is the final earthly corrective to the corrupt justice system of bureaucrats under him.⁹

In my judgment, interpreting this passage requires observing an important allusion back to the book of Genesis. In 2:15, when God set Adam in the garden of Eden, he charged Adam “to work/cultivate [עבד; *abad*] it and to keep/watch over [שמר; *shamar*] it.” These two verses, then, deal with Adam’s original creation mandate to cultivate the garden, and to keep it—to protect it from unrighteousness that would corrupt it. The Preacher is holding up the current situation to God’s original plan, and seeing how far short the high and higher officials actually keep justice in the world, while also observing the necessity of cultivating the land for the survival and well-being of the people. Adam failed at his task, and those entrusted with authority continue to fail at the task.

Painful Wealth (Eccl. 5:10–17)

The next section is much simpler to interpret, but much more difficult to obey. In v. 8–9, the Preacher simply counsels us to continue in our work while entrusting ourselves to the Most High Judge. Much of his counsel in those two verses are directed toward contentedness (“do not be amazed at the matter”; v. 8), since there often isn’t much more we can do. In v. 10–17, though, deals with our approach to work and wealth in ways that all of us deal with every day of our lives. The Preacher begins with our hearts: “He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity” (v. 10). Bridges notes that the word “satisfied” often

⁴ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 69.

⁵ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 110.

⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 46.

⁷ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 112.

⁸ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 312.

⁹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 51.

refers to physical appetites (i.e., eating and drinking), and he writes this about the insatiability of an appetite for money: “The appetite is created—not satisfied. The vanity of this disease is coveting what does not satisfy when we have it. Hunger is satisfied with meat, and thirst with drink. But hunger or thirst for this world’s wealth is as unsatisfied at the end, as at the beginning.”¹⁰ It is not only that the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Tim. 6:10), but that such a love can never provide what it promises.

In v. 11, the Preacher notes another problem coming from riches: “When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes?” The “they” who “increase” to eat the increased goods would refer to the servants employed by the wealthy. As Murphy observes, the relationship between a wealthy master and his servants was intertwined, for “the master will be dependent upon them also for his riches, since the workers labor for his profit.”¹¹ Go continue to grow in wealth means hiring more laborers; however, more laborers devour those increase in riches. Ultimately, the owner gains nothing but his ability to “see them with his eyes”—that is, to look out over his impressive operation. The question such an owner must be asking, though, is, “Do I really want to be tied down by stuff?”¹² Instead of ever-increasing wealth by the means of ever-increasing complexity of the employer, the Preacher encourages us to value a simpler life: “Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep” (v. 12). The management of great wealth brings anxiety and misery that disrupts lives at multiple points, while simple labor brings sweet sleep at night.

Then, as a capstone to his warning against the over-accumulation of wealth, the Preacher tells a parable of “a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture” (v. 13–14a). The phrase “grievous evil” may be more literally captured, as Longman has it, as “sickening evil.”¹³ That is, it is a sickening thought to see a man who has spent himself in chasing after wealth, only to have that wealth disappear suddenly in a “bad venture.” Compounding the difficulty, the Preacher notes, “And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand” (v. 14b). After all his toil, the rich man cannot pass down any wealth by inheritance to his son. Instead, “As he came from his mother’s womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.” (v. 15). So, “quite exactly as” he came into the world at birth (i.e., with nothing—not even clothing), so he will depart the world with nothing (v. 16a).¹⁴ What gain is there for such a man (v. 16b)? The Preacher gives a somber evaluation of such a man’s life: “Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger” (v. 17). Riches cannot satisfy, and if a man spends his whole life pursuing them, he risks losing everything he has worked for in a moment.

Paradoxical Joy (Eccl. 5:18–20)

At the end of Ecclesiastes 5, though, the Preacher returns to one of the few passages of comfort

¹⁰ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 113.

¹¹ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 52.

¹² Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 72.

¹³ Longman, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, 161.

¹⁴ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 118.

in the book. He writes, “Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot” (v. 18). We should pay special attention to the words “see” and “good,” since these are important words of evaluation in the Bible, beginning with God’s own sevenfold evaluation of his creation: “And God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Even so, this is also the first step toward the original sin, when the woman attempts to evaluate the forbidden fruit by her own criteria, apart from God’s word: “And when the woman *saw* that the tree was *good* for food...” (Gen. 3:6). This is the phrase that leads Moses’s mother to save her infant son (“...and when she saw that he was good [ESV: “fine”]...”; Ex. 2:2), as well as to David’s adultery: “...he saw...the woman was very good [ESV: “beautiful”]...”; 2 Sam. 11:2). Importantly, then, we should see that the Bible uses this phrase both to describe what is truly good, as well as what someone wrongly judges to be good.

The Preacher, then, uses this phrase often as he evaluates life under the sun (Eccl. 2:1, 3; 3:13, 22; 11:7). In particular, the Preacher uses this phrase to describe the gifts given to humankind from God, for us to enjoy under the sun; however, the Preacher will explore this question of what is “good” much more later in the book.¹⁵ While the Preacher does not sugarcoat the many vanities under the sun, he also takes care to make note of the good that we receive from the hand of God. Here, the Preacher urges us to eat and drink and find enjoyment in our toil under the sun during the few days of our lives.

As Kidner observes, this is not a mere call to minimalism in life, but a call to faith, regardless of what comes: “At first sight this may look like the mere praise of simplicity and moderation; but in fact the key word is God, and the secret of life held out to us is openness to Him: a readiness to take what comes to us as heaven-sent, whether it is toil or wealth or both.”¹⁶ Shaw puts this in common, but memorable, terms: “Stuff disappoints because it isn’t God. Stuff disappoints because it cannot be relied on. It can disappear. It can be lost in a bad venture. It can leave one shamed before a watching world. God, on the other hand, does not disappoint. He can be relied on. One thing for which God can be relied on is the enjoyment of the small, ordinary things of life.”¹⁷

So, for everyone “to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God” (v. 19). Rather than wasting away from vexation over the injustice in the world, and rather than toiling with all our strength toward squeezing more wealth out of our time, we would do well to cultivate joy in every good gift we receive as a gift of God. For the one who lives in this way, the Preacher says that “he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart” (v. 20). There is a profound truth here, that if we toil in an all-out search for wealth, we will find toil in all its grueling, joy-sapping cruelty; however, if we seek the joy that comes from simple dependence on the providential generosity of God, we will never lack. With this kind of faith, life is not painful and torturous and a vanity. Rather, for such a man of faith “life passes swiftly, not because it is short and meaningless but because, by the grace of God, he finds it utterly absorbing.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

¹⁶ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 58.

¹⁷ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 75.

¹⁸ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 58–59.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What does the Preacher tell us about the reality of public injustice (v. 8)? Why does he tell us not to be amazed by the corruption we see among public officials? What does the system of high and higher officials tell us about the need for accountability and oversight in public justice? Does this mean that we should be passive or fatalistic or dismissive of such public injustice? How does the Preacher's words about "cultivated fields" lead us simply to do our work (1 Thess. 4:11)?
- 2) If money brings such pleasure, why does the Preacher warn us that ultimately money cannot satisfy us (v. 10)? What problems come with the increase of money (v. 11)? Why might the poor laborer sleep better than the wealthy man (v. 12)? What does the Preacher's parable of the rich father who loses his son's inheritance tell us about the uncertainty of riches (v. 13–16)? Why does such a man live out his days in angry confusion (v. 17)? How are you tempted toward money?
- 3) Given everything the Preacher has just written, how does he finally claim that it is "good and fitting...to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil" in our lives (v. 18)? In what sense is our toil a gift from God's hand (v. 18–19)? How does looking to our work and our possessions as the gift of God adjust our perception in such a way that avoids the warnings of the two previous sections of this passage? How does this help us to seek not the gift, but the Giver?
- 4) What does the Preacher mean when he promises that God will keep us "occupied with joy in [our] heart" (v. 20)? How can we find lasting joy, when the world is filled with injustice, and our own hearts are chasing after unsatisfying wealth? What do you tend to pursue when you long for satisfying joy? What does the Preacher teach you about the wisdom of what you are pursuing? What, then, does this passage teach you about finding paradoxical joy from the hand of God?