

Ecclesiastes And Christian Living (Part Seven): Contentment

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Not until I purposely took a break from this series on Ecclesiastes did I realize, while meditating on some of the material we have covered, that we have been covering a sub-theme that flows just below the surface. Solomon never names it directly, but it is nonetheless present, especially in chapters 4-6. Perhaps, if I can put a modern name to this theme, it will help bring some clarity: It is materialism. Solomon is showing that materialism is a poor source for seeking satisfaction in one's life.

Materialism is the modern label given to the ancient philosophical doctrine that physical well-being and material possessions constitute the highest good in life. Here in this Western world, our cultures have been virtually overwhelmed by this thinking.

Materialism Is Not the Answer

Before proceeding any further, we will quickly summarize Ecclesiastes to this point. Recall that, in chapter 1, Solomon essentially states that life is meaningless. This is the starting point of his thesis, which ends with him declaring that the whole duty of man is to fear God and keep His commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13). He thus states dogmatically that, despite what carnal men say, a clear purpose exists for life, and the concepts of materialism do not drive God's purpose for this world.

Thus, in chapter 2, he immediately launches into what he had learned about his works of building material things like houses and gardens and seeking even greater wealth. His conclusion? All of these material achievements were nothing but vanity, a grasping after wind.

He finds no real, sustained profit in them, nothing that truly added to his quality of life, no lasting fulfillment. He does not mean they resulted in no sense of achievement or passing pleasure, but that their fruit never truly fulfilled God's purpose for man. Therefore, those things are poor substitutes for a sustained sense of well-being. He then proceeds into an exploration of wine and entertainment. These are simply another form of materialism, ways of pleasing the flesh. He concludes that they, too, are folly, a mad pursuit.

Chapter 3 seemingly deviates from this theme, but the deviation is purposeful. He is planting a seed for further, wider, and greater understanding, a true foundation to build on. He shows that God, though unseen, is actively guiding and deeply involved in working in His creation, effectively moving both time and events to fulfill His purposes for individuals and nations. God has already given us a priceless gift: He has put eternity into our hearts to remind us that His work involves us in an eternal, spiritual—not a material—purpose. Our lives have direction.

In chapters 4-6, he shows us that satisfaction in life is produced or given as a result of gifts tendered by God, who is intimately involved with us in working out His purpose as we seek Him. Thus, he comes to a partial conclusion at the book's halfway point.

Satisfaction in life is not derived from wealth, status in society, or any material thing. Material things can provide pleasure, and that is good, but like everything physical, the pleasure is momentary

compared to the eternal. It is the eternal, spiritual relationship with our Creator, in which God gifts us with what we need to use our lives wisely, that brings the balanced and sustained measure of satisfaction. To make right use of this life in glorifying God is our goal. It is the righteous pursuit.

Satisfaction and Contentment

Part Six showed that satisfaction in life is not attained simply because a person may have an abundance of material means and goods to accompany him through life. It also requires his life to be accompanied by God, imparting gifts that provide him with the proper appreciation of the blessings he is receiving.

Chapters 4-6 have influenced my thinking to an extent I never dreamed. Some of the impact is due to my age, but I have also come to appreciate this book's wisdom as never before. Before this study, I always found Ecclesiastes mystifying; I could not grasp its purpose. I have since found it has much to teach us. I now see it as one of the most bluntly practical writings in the entire Bible. It is, however, not an elementary book in any way. Its thoughts are brief but complex and sometimes difficult. One must research and thoroughly think through its metaphors to discover their lessons.

The primary lesson these chapters impart is how much a Christian needs his relationship with God. Not since becoming converted have I ever thought I did not need the relationship, but since beginning this series on Ecclesiastes, I now see it is an urgent necessity to hang on to it for dear life.

Why? This article takes a step beyond satisfaction in life to contentment. Though "satisfaction" and "contentment" are usually—and correctly—considered as synonyms, there is a meaningful difference. As Solomon shows in the previous chapter, contentment is a learned quality. Paul shows he learned it in his relationship with God (Philippians 4:11). Thus, it is a fruit of faith working within the relationship.

The Bible's usage of "contentment" comes close to implying a Christian needs no more and suggesting that there is no other source for it than a person's relationship with God. A contented person is at peace. In contrast, satisfaction contains a momentary, temporary implication. It most certainly includes a sense of gratification and thankfulness but allows room for more and greater satisfaction. It is as though a need has been met, assuring a person that he is on the right course for life, but now on to new challenges. We need both of these fruits for the quality of life that God desires us to have.

The Necessity of a Creator

David writes in Psalm 139:13-14:

For You have formed my inward parts; You have covered me in my mother's womb. I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well.

This is a somewhat elementary, perhaps even a crude, illustration that clearly pictures why the relationship with God is absolutely necessary. It begins by admitting that we neither created ourselves nor gave ourselves life. David admits someone else made him; he did not arise to life fully formed out of nothing. Like him, we did not determine that we would physically be in God's image. The Creator made that determination. Can we mentally picture God kneeling down in the dirt,

placing Adam's every part where He wanted it and determining how every part would function with every other system in his body? Even everyday realities such as these need a functioning Creator to bring them to pass.

The need for a relationship with our Creator is beginning to emerge. II Corinthians 5:17 carries the need of the creative relationship a major step further: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." We are now a new creation, a spiritual creation. A process begun in Eden continues.

When Paul wrote about a "new" creation, he had his choice of two Greek words. One expresses newness in the sense of "renovation." However, Paul used the second term, which suggests new in the sense of "brand new." He indicates, then, a person as a new individual with a new family, a new set of values, new motivations, and new possessions. Nothing new in this sense creates itself. Even a new baby in a womb does not make itself. The baby has absolutely no idea what it is in process of becoming.

Are we making ourselves spiritually? As a new creation in Christ Jesus, we are no more making ourselves spiritually than we did physically. However, this creation is far more difficult and important because it requires our mindful and willing *cooperation* with our Creator.

How clearly and precisely do we foresee where our spiritual Creator is headed? To say it bluntly, without God's calling, which creates the relationship with Him, there is no possibility whatever of knowing anything meaningful about what God is in the process of creating, and therefore no eternal, spiritual salvation would exist. Do we know how to give ourselves everlasting life? Do we know where we will fit into the Creator's finished plan?

Therefore, it is our responsibility always to do whatever is necessary to seek Him and glorify Him, helping to keep the relationship going and knowledge increasing. Without the relationship that He invited us into, there is no possibility of ever accomplishing the end that He is heading toward and yielding to what He desires. It is as though He has opened the gate to allow us back into the Garden of Eden, right into the very source of every good and perfect gift that will enable us to glorify Him by fulfilling our responsibilities to Him. It is as if He says, as He opens the gate, "Now there, let's begin the next step in My overall purpose!"

The Point: A Fully Developed Life

Are we content with this? Part of the conclusion we can reach from the examples given in chapters 4-6 and from observing the activities and attitudes of many around us is that, somehow, almost nobody learns that enjoyment and contentment in life, not just satisfaction, are generated from within and enabled by the gifts God gives from within a relationship with Him. The basic cause of never learning this is that there is no relationship with Him. Thus, because they continuously grasp for it by other means, the unconverted never reach the state of contentment necessary for true satisfaction. We can avoid this pitfall by avoiding the temptation to reach for satisfaction in the same manner as those living under-the-sun lives.

In a relationship with God, we have the comfort of knowing that creative development is taking place and a purpose is being worked out. This provides balanced contentment and satisfaction in life, even though we do not have complete answers either. It is God within the relationship who provides hope in the face of life's trials. He, our Creator, has deemed that we must face hardship with Him

involved. Did not Israel face hardship under God in the wilderness, even though they had visible representations of Him at all times in the cloud and pillar of fire?

We learn from the Israelites' example that hardship can come from many different directions. Much of mankind's restlessness and dissatisfaction in life derives from his carnal nature never being satisfied, a fact that we must come to understand. Human nature forever wants more. Its desires, its cravings, its appetites, like those in our stomach, are briefly satisfied only to return hungering, as though it had never been filled. Rich or poor, wise or foolish, male or female, young or old—all must deal with this same basic issue. All have unfulfilled longings to take in hand.

One commentator compared our desires to being like a tramp, a word not used much today but used frequently during the Great Depression of the 1930s. A tramp is a person who wanders aimlessly about and never settles down in one place to hold a job, put down roots, and prosper. He is never content to stay at home. Thus personified, carnal desire loves to “window shop,” always eager to find or do something new “to make life more fulfilling.” It is as though our desires are always traveling but never arriving, which is why Solomon mentions the wandering of desire in Ecclesiastes 6:9.

Another commentator illustrates how quickly a person's attention can latch on to a desire, even in the face of grave danger. During the famous eruption of Mount Vesuvius just outside of Pompeii, Italy, in AD 79, the gases and lava flows moved so rapidly that they caught people in the midst of various activities, entombing them right in those acts as though they had been sculpted.

One woman so “caught in the act” was apparently fleeing the eruption. Interestingly, her feet pointed in one direction, that is, apparently in the direction of escape from the dangers of the eruption, but her head, one arm, and hand were pointed behind her. It seems that even as she fled for her life, something behind her caught her attention. She reached back to grab it, but in that very instant, she died and was covered by the eruption's debris, evidently not even falling to the ground. Was she reaching for a beautiful piece of jewelry that she did not want to leave behind? Nobody knows, but her desire was never fulfilled. It appears to have destroyed her life.

Without saying it frequently or directly, God is gradually showing through Solomon's illustrations that it is He, giving His gifts within the relationship, who adds purpose and fulfillment to mere living. He has the power to gift us with what truly builds a life of satisfying and contented fulfillment.

Solomon is getting at something that is keenly important. Most of us live in areas where we can watch birds. Birds seem to spend all their waking hours looking for food to eat. All animals have this same characteristic. Their activity provides helpful insight: The birds are alive but not really living as we understand living. They merely exist. Yet, at the same time, they are fulfilling a purpose for which God created them, and they even sing about it.

Solomon is not suggesting at all that it is wrong to either work or eat, nor is it sin that we should have desires, of and by themselves. Working, eating, and having desires can be quite enjoyable and profitable. But if that is all we do, we merely exist at an animal level. We must do something with our lives that is positive and purposeful and conforms to God's purpose, or we are going to waste them, achieving nothing within His purpose.

Life Is More Than Dreaming

We are part of God's spiritual creation. A person being spiritually created in the image of God must not drift but deliberately choose to live for goals far higher, goals that God establishes. Solomon is not belittling anybody, but simply teaching a truth, a reality that material things of themselves cannot make life richly satisfying. A Christian's life must be rightly balanced toward his relationship with God, and he must strive to follow God by living in the same loving manner as Christ did as a human and continues doing eternally.

Ecclesiastes 6:9 is Solomon's version of the cliché, "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush." He is essentially saying, "It is better to have little and purposely enjoy it than to dream about much and never attain it." A problem with dreams is that, all too often, they never become a reality. Thus, a sense of satisfaction and contentment remains unfulfilled. Solomon is not saying it is wrong to have a dream on which to spend our ambition, but that our ambition must be motivated for the glory of God and not the praise of men—including ourselves. If we think material achievements will automatically produce these qualities, we are wrong.

True satisfaction and contentment comes when we do the will of God from the heart for His glory. When that happens, we get to share in real satisfaction. In John 4:34, Jesus says, "My food [meaning that which energizes Him and fills His life with satisfaction] is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work." David adds in Psalm 16:11: "You will show me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." That is real satisfaction and contentment. These verses reinforce the truth that satisfaction and contentment in life is within a relationship with God.

True happiness and these qualities in life do not automatically result from "making a good living." Rather, they are a very blessed byproduct of making a good life with God as our Leader. If one devotes his life to doing God's will, satisfaction and contentment will be its fruit.

Questions Asked by the Self-justifying

Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 6:10-12:

Whatever one is, he has been named already, for it is known that he is man; and he cannot contend with Him who is mightier than he. Since there are many things that increase vanity, how is man the better? For who knows what is good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen after him under the sun?

The meaning of these verses is mystifying. One commentator suggests this title: "Questions Without Answers." This does not mean, though, that one should ignore God and His way and avoid receiving godly correction. Why? Because God does have the answers, and He reveals them individually within the relationship. We may need the answers very much.

The questions must be understood, at least somewhat, against the background of the context of these last chapters, in which he is showing that the roots of true satisfaction and contentment lie within God's gifting within a relationship with Him. In addition, we must understand them by evaluating the book's overall theme, in which he urges us to keep God's commandments, thus to live an above-the-sun life. We can also seek to grasp them by considering Solomon and what he reveals of himself.

Solomon presents a series of perplexing statements, but he gives no clear answers in the immediate context. Recall, however, that the overall subject of the chapter is about finding satisfaction in life, and he uses examples to illustrate circumstances about why life is puzzling and dissatisfying.

Let us consider Solomon himself. Did he know the answers? First, he probably knew the overall answer to satisfaction and contentment in life, but he did not necessarily experience it because he did not apply God's way well. It is difficult to see how, having a father like David, as well as the personal experiences he had with God early in his manhood, that he did not know the overall answer. However, did he truly believe it? Did he live it? Both are necessary.

God has not answered this in absolute terms as He does regarding David. We have no doubt that David will be in God's Kingdom. Based on what is in the Bible, the answer regarding Solomon is that he apparently fell short. Is he lost? We do not know.

Nevertheless, he knew intellectually what the missing link is. The answer to contentment in life hinges on whether one knows what God's overall purpose for his life is. It is another matter altogether whether we believe that purpose is true and make the effort to seek God and live as He commands by faith.

Verse 10 is essentially saying that God is sovereign, and some things that He has established cannot be changed. Naming a thing is an indication that the thing so named is set. This is why the principles given in John 4:34 and Psalm 16:11 are so important to the converted. Being in God's presence is the overall solution. These statements by Jesus and David give assurance that contentment in life lies within the combination of properly blending the knowledge of God's purpose and deliberately choosing to live according to that purpose within a relationship with our very Creator.

This combination is what makes everything in life matter in a positive way, producing satisfaction and contentment in life. In this three-verse section, Solomon addresses four situations that revolve around not getting much in the way of these qualities from life because people do not give of themselves sufficiently to make the relationship work. Each verse, rather than answering, produces questions that, with a brief explanation, are helpful. If one does not get answers he can accept, then dissatisfaction and discontentment remain.

The questions that arise in these verses are expressions of justification that a converted person might give himself for not zealously throwing himself into the relationship with God. They are for the most part expressions of doubt that linger to support the lack of progress.

Solomon's Five Questions

Solomon touches on five questions. The *first* is based in verse 10: "Since what's going to be is going to be, why bother to make decisions? Isn't it all predestined anyway?" This is broadly why some will not really cooperate with God in a relationship. Martin Luther gave this German proverb: "As things have been, so they still are; and as things are so shall they be." In other words, the proverb is asking if there anything we actually control. Things are so far from our control, why make an effort?

In this verse, the One "mightier than he" is God. We must firmly accept that God can indeed accomplish His purposes without our cooperation. He does not need us, but He most assuredly loves us! God indeed has "fixed," that is, named what He will accomplish, but He has also given us free-moral agency.

We must know that the world we live in is not a prison. We are free to evaluate and then choose what our personal world will be, but we are not free to change what the consequences of our actions will be. This is why we should give everything thoughtful consideration. Stepping off the roof of a ten-story building may be our choice, but once we commit ourselves and do it, there is no altering the outcome!

Everything matters! Job discovered this in a grueling and humbling circumstance with God. Job 42:3, 6 states his lack of thoughtful consideration before Him:

You asked, “Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?” Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . . Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

The reality is that our choices do make a great deal of difference. Like everything in life, they matter.

The *second* question is also based in verse 10. Why disagree with God? We cannot oppose Him and win, can we? This question suggests that God’s will is difficult, painful to accomplish, and should be avoided at all costs.

Compare this with what Jesus says in Matthew 11:29-30: “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.” Add to this what He says earlier in His ministry about doing God’s will being nourishing and energizing to a Christian. Why would anyone, making a fair analysis by comparing God’s way with his self-chosen way and seeing what mankind has produced in this world, rather have his own way rather than God’s? That makes no sense whatever!

If God really wanted to make life truly difficult, He would give man absolute freedom—and that is exactly where this world is heading during this end time. It really builds satisfaction and contentment, right? No, not at all.

Like Job, we must know what our limits are, and one of them is that we do not have the wisdom to out-think and out-talk God. We must truly realize that the more we talk, the emptier our words become, which is exactly what happened to Job. This leads to the fact that humanity must accept that God, as sovereign Creator, is free to act as He sees fit in every situation. Such acceptance will help to produce the contentment that mankind yearns for.

The *third* question appears to be drawn from Solomon’s many words in writing this book, in addition to all the words we might hear in sermons and the like. He asks, “What do we accomplish with all these words? Does talking about it solve the problems?”

Verse 11 in the *New International Version* reads, “The more words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?” Are we not receiving a thorough education in this as we listen to all the convoluted political and economic arguments in recent times? Yet, these are all words of men. The Word of God is exactly what is needed because it is truth! God’s truths do not bind people; they free (John 8:32). Satisfaction and contentment are the fruits of truth that is accepted and used. One must listen to God’s Word and use it for satisfaction in life.

The *fourth* question arises from verse 12: “Who knows what is good for us?” This question is directly linked to the previous one. It brings to mind a saying that this same Solomon states twice in

Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” Human history proves that without the knowledge of God, mankind finds himself satanically deceived, drifting forever on a vast sea of human speculations. However, God knows what is good for us, and He is willing to share it with His children. Without the knowledge of God’s truth, life remains vanity, meaningless. God’s Word says, “He who does the will of God abides forever” (I John 2:17)—in, I might add, satisfaction and contentment.

The *fifth* question also derives from verse 12: “Does anybody know what is coming next?” This question must be understood within the context of the entire book. It is not talking about small, day-to-day issues, but rather the huge ones that pertain to the overall purpose being worked out on earth. Of course, the answer is that nobody knows perfectly except for God. Everybody else’s opinions are largely speculations. If God gave us more specific detail, it might severely damage the vital use of faith. He gives us enough information to keep us looking ahead and to encourage us to be patient and make the best use of the time that He gives us to prepare, because time is valuable.

The Correct Response for All Concerned

The proper answer to all of these questions—especially if it is correct that they are self-justifications raised by converted persons due to a lack of growth—lies in one’s use of the faith that God has given us to function within the relationship that He has opened to us.

Life is God’s gift, and He desires that we spend it involved with Him, using our faith to prepare for an eternal relationship with Him in His Family Kingdom. This will produce the enjoyable satisfaction and contentment in life that He desires for us. Involving Him is the above-the-sun life.

If there is no Kingdom of God, and if no grand purpose is being worked out, then nothing matters except for what is happening at the moment. This is the mindset of the intellectual and ruling elite in this nation, and they are continuing to slide into it more deeply. This mindset is tilted toward either humanism or secularism, and its fruit is the moral and ethical depravity of a Sodom and Gomorrah. They have nothing glorious to prepare for, so why should they deny themselves any pleasure, any excitement, that their minds and bodies desire right now? God’s children, however, because they possess *the* faith, cannot allow themselves to drift into such a destructive mindset.

That leads into the overall subject of the next two chapters of Ecclesiastes: wisdom. To the modern mind, wisdom seems to have evolved into a philosophical abstraction, so it is difficult to nail down as something concrete and useful for daily life.

However, the Bible takes pains to show that the ancient Israelites perceived wisdom as a practical, mental quality linked to skill and most strongly associated with skill in living. It appears primarily to be a fruit of knowledge and understanding derived from life’s experiences and fashioned into a highly honed skill. In order to achieve the highest level of this skill, a person must be working with truth, and this is exactly where the Word of God becomes exceedingly important.