The Vanity of Wealth
Ecclesiastes 5:8-6:12

We're looking at Ecclesiastes and this passage on money and wealth. And the mere fact that this was written over two thousand years ago tells you something: the desire to get rich is not new! But that shouldn't surprise us, should it? You see, the writer, the Preacher, is investigating life 'under the sun' - a life where God plays no part. And his repeated diagnosis is that, in such a secular world, everything is *hebel*, it's like smoke. You try and hold on to it, but it slips through your fingers, there's no substance to it. And if that's the case, it's no wonder we run to concrete things, things we can handle, and hold, and count - things that feel solid, like possessions and wealth, to find meaning and stability and satisfaction in life.

But in this passage he begins by taking us to those who don't have those things - to the poor.

The Powerlessness of Poverty
Look at v8, 'If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.'

Su and I are slowly coming to the end of applying for Swiss citizenship. And when I say slowly, I mean *slowly*. There are the application forms, that you submit and get sent back to resubmit. There are the interviews and exams in the commune. Then at the canton. And then it goes back to the commune, before going back to the canton, before finally your application limps its way to the federal authorities, and you think Jesus could return before they approve this! Well, if the desire to be rich is nothing new, neither is bureaucracy, the Preacher says.

Because the citizen, especially the poor citizen, with few resources and little education, and who needs justice to fight for them, is met by a wall of red tape. And phone calls aren't returned, and their dossier is passed from one department to another, and that piece of documentation they sent in? 'Sorry, we've no record of it.'

And the Preacher says, don't be amazed at this. Don't be amazed that the system seems weighted against the poor and the marginalised. Why? Because each layer of bureaucracy is being watched by the one above. Superiors are keeping their eye out for any trouble, any competition from those ambitious young bucks below them, so they'll stall anything that might help them get noticed. And those below learn if you want to get ahead in the system, curry favour with the boss, don't rock the boat, don't question previous decisions. And so the machinery of government moves slowly. And it's the poor who need the system to work for them, who suffer.

But there's another reason. Because in a corrupt system, everyone's in on the game. Everyone's getting a cut and watching out for his mates. So don't be amazed when you see the poor unable to get justice, because you know the heart of man, he'll use his power and influence to prosper himself and his mates - not the guy who can't give him anything.

So what's the answer? Become British the Preacher says - have a monarchy! Verse 9, 'But this is gain for a land in every way: a king committed to cultivated fields.' Ok, maybe not a monarchy *per se*, but a king, a system of government, that wants its people to thrive through productivity. That encourages industry over laziness and cultivation over corruption.

But, you could hear what the Preacher says here and think, ok, so the answer to the futility of poverty is the market, it's wealth creation. Well… 'no' says the Preacher. Wealth creation is

absolutely better than people being strangled by red tape or corruption. But if poverty is one problem, the love of money is not the answer.

The Vanity of Riches

I don't know if you saw in the news, but Jeff Bezos, of Amazon, has just bought himself a new super yacht. With a neat price tag of 500m dollars. Apparently, it's what the super-rich have been up to in COVID. And you can look at something like that and think, 'man, I would love just half of what he has, if I had that then I'd know I'd made it in life.' But in the rest of the passage the Preacher puts that desire for wealth under the microscope. And as he does so, in v8-17 there's no mention of God. So this is wealth for wealth's sake. This is the making of money in a secular world where God has been erased. And his conclusion is, it's *hebel*.

Firstly, there's **the vanity of loving it**.

Verse 10, 'He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity.' You see, you can look at someone like Bezos and think, 'I would love what he has.' And the Preacher says, no you wouldn't. Because it will never satisfy you. You think it'll deliver the goods for you, but in reality it's like smoke that slips through your fingers. Just ask the super-rich. JD Rockefeller, the Jeff Bezos of his day, was asked, how much is enough? And he replied, "Just a little bit more." Just one more dollar. Why? Because wealth promises you happiness and fulfilment, but you get it and it doesn't quite deliver, so the obvious conclusion is, you don't have quite enough. You need just a little bit more.

The actor Rafe Spall recently told an interviewer, 'All I've got to do is put my name into Google or Twitter and I can see what people really think of me.' And the bad reviews 'make you feel terrible' but the good reviews also 'make you feel nothing', he said. And he describes how it was after after appearing in a one man show at the National Theatre, where every performance ended with a standing ovation and rave reviews, that he finally got it: All the applause he said, 'Didn't make me feel any better as a human. We spend our lives going, 'If I just achieve this amount of success, status, *financial security*; if I just lose 10lbs, *then* I'll feel okay.' …[But] this isn't the case. You realise that *there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow*. But it was good… because I realised no amount of adulation is going to be enough. *No amount of success* will *ever* make you feel good.'

He who loves money, or adulation, the Preacher says, will never be satisfied by it.

But it's not just that money loved for itself doesn't satisfy, it also brings a whole load of undesirables with it: v11: 'When goods increase, they increase who eat them.' Imagine the scenario: You get a better job with a better salary, so you put your kids into private school. But your kids now mix with kids who have the latest gadgets, and go on better holidays, and you need to stay in the game, because in a secular world 'under the sun' life's all competition and comparisons - but it comes with a price tag. And you can afford a bigger house, so you need a cleaner, and a gardener, and a nanny for the kids, because work is consuming more of your time. And the kids aren't doing so well at school, so you get a private tutor. And you need a financial advisor, who doesn't do it for nothing, and a lawyer. And your stress is rising, so there's the therapist. And increased wealth obviously means increased taxes.

And you thought it'd be great to earn what you're earning, but it just seems to get consumed, and it feels like you're getting consumed along the way. Earn even more, and you're not even sure if you have any real friends, friends who like you for who you are, not what you have.

But the love of money is also futile because wealth can never give you rest. *Literally*, the Preacher says. Verse 12, 'Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.' Now, admit it. Have you ever been out to dinner and eaten too much and then lain in bed, unable to sleep, thinking, 'I ate way too much.' And wealth does that, the Preacher says. You eat more food. You drink more wine. You put on more weight. And you lose more sleep.

And there's a deep irony here, isn't there? We spend money on gym memberships, or sports stuff, or doctors fees to undo the effects of having money. It's the *hebel* of thinking wealth will deliver for you, the Preacher says. It consumes itself as it consumes you.

But secondly, there's **the vanity of losing it**.

Verse 13-14, 'There is 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. And he is father of a son.' So this is a case of a life ruined twice over. Ruined by the getting of wealth, - riches kept to his hurt - maybe impacting his health, or cutting him off from true friends - and ruined by the loss of it. Now, the Preacher doesn't tell us how he loses it - because you can fill in the blank can't you: maybe he was fired and couldn't get another job; maybe there was a financial crash and he went down with everyone else. The point is, he lost it and has nothing to pass on to his son, and in a world under the sun it's *hebel* - there's no point to it.

But it's that fleetingness of wealth, the fact that you *can* lose it, that should make you think twice before loving it, the Preacher is saying. As Proverbs says, 'Do not toil to acquire wealth; be discerning enough to desist. When your eyes light on it, it is gone, for suddenly it sprouts wings, flying like an eagle to heaven' (Prov 23:4-5). In other words, you can sacrifice everything for a future that never comes. You spend your life toiling away for that little bit more and it's snatched from under your nose.

But it's not just that you can lose it, it's that you can't take it with you. Because it's not just God who is unimpressed by wealth, in a secular world where there is no God and no eternity, money does you no good in the face of death, does it? The Grim Reaper takes no bribes. Verse 15, 'As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing of his toil that he may carry away in his hand.' As Paul writes to Timothy, 'We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.' (1 Tim 6:7)

And the Preacher is saying, that fact should make you question the point of all your 'doing' in an under the sun world: v16: 'This also is a grievous evil: just as he came, so shall he go, *and what gain is there to him who toils for the wind?*' Because if you come with nothing, and leave with nothing, what's the point? All your getting, all your accumulation, is *hebel*. Futile. Death is the ultimate financial crash.

But it's not just that you'll lose it all in the darkness of death, it's that if you let the love of money get a grip of your heart, you'll bring that darkness forward into this life. Verse 17, 'Moreover, all his

days he eats in darkness in much vexation and sickness and anger.' Get preoccupied with making it big, or with having lost it big, and it will take a physical, emotional and spiritual toll on you. The pressure of work, the comparing with others, can bring a real darkness into your life. As Jesus said in the parable of the sower, the cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches - wealth promising you a happiness it can never deliver, and the desire for others things, choke the life out of you.

But there's one more vanity of wealth the Preacher wants you to see: **The vanity of not enjoying it.**

Chapter 6:1-2: 'There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy on mankind: a man to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honour, so that he lacks nothing of all that he desires, yet God does not give him power to enjoy them… This is vanity.'

Now, the Preacher doesn't tell us what stops the man enjoying his wealth. Does he fall sick? Is he the victim of injustice? Does war rob him? The point is, the cause doesn't matter. It's the fact that it can happen. And that tells you, wealth comes with no guarantee of happiness. But we instinctively think we *should* be able to enjoy the fruit of what we've worked for, don't we? That there's something fundamentally unjust with that being taken from us. It's why the Preacher calls it an evil, that it lies heavy, that it's wrong. But in a secular world, where there is no God and no ultimate right and wrong, what grounds do we have for saying anything is wrong?

But whatever the reason was this man didn't enjoy his wealth, the Preacher's point is that you can have it, in fact, you can have everything the ancient world would have considered 'it': wealth, honour, even, v3, 'a hundred children and live many years' and still have 'no burial'. You can still die unmourned and unlamented. Because you can have everything, but be so taken up with getting it that you never enjoyed what you already had - friends, family, even possessions. It was always the next thing you were after. And that leaves you incredibly rich but incredibly poor. And to live like that is to badly misjudge life, the Preacher says. In fact, v3, 'I say that a stillborn child is better off than he.' Because to miscarry at birth is better than to miscarry throughout life.

In 2007 the journalist and editor of Humble Dollar, Jonathan Clements, wrote an article in the Wall Street Journal, entitled, 'No satisfaction: why what you have is never enough.' And he said, 'We may have life and liberty. But the pursuit of happiness isn't going so well. As a country, we are richer than ever. Yet surveys show that Americans are no happier than they were 30 years ago. The key problem: We aren't very good at figuring out what will make us happy.'

As that other great financial guru, Johnny Cash said, 'Being rich means you get to worry about *everything except* money.' It's why the Preacher says the stillborn infant is better off than rich person who can't enjoy what he already has, because, v5, 'it finds *rest* rather than he.' Because wealth will never give you that inner rest, the rest that says, you can stop trying to prove yourself.

So, we need something better than wealth. Something that that will give us rest, something that will satisfy. Something that will undermine the craving for just a little bit more.

The Power of Contentment

Well, if in v8-17 there's zero mention of God, get to v18-20 and suddenly God is everywhere. Verse 18-19, '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*.'

So, there's a way of living that's good, that's fitting. That fits you as you were made to be. And it's not poverty, but neither is it the vanity of wealth. It's to find pleasure in the small, daily things of life - the things you already have.

In that interview I mentioned earlier with Rafe Spall, having said no amount of success or adulation will ever make you feel good, he said, 'It's such a cliché, but you realise what matters. The kids, the quotidian drudgery, the nappies, the night times. That's where the love is.' Exactly, the Preacher would say. Even the daily drudgery. Even in the midst of the toil and *hebel* of life.

You see, the secular person thinks that wealth and joy go together. That wealth *does* come with a guarantee: have it, and I'll escape toil and find joy. And the Preacher's saying, 'No. The power to enjoy things does not lie in the things themselves, it's a gift from God.'

Verse 19, 'Everyone also 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*.' So instead of pursuing wealth, cultivate an openness to God. See all that you have, even your daily work, as his gift, and as you do you'll find the power to enjoy them. See what you have as heaven sent and you probably won't get any richer, but you will most certainly become happier.

Jesus said, you've got to decide which master you'll serve. 'No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.' (Matt 6:24). As Paul said, 'As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to… set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy' (1 Tim 6:17).

Basically, life comes down to a choice of who you'll trust, doesn't it? You can pursue that little bit more, thinking it will give you the life you want, and it will slowly strangle the life out of you. Or you can pursue the God of all joy. The God who, in Christ, gave up true riches and became poor to make you rich. The Son of God who subjected himself to the powerlessness of poverty, that you can have the power to enjoy all things. The One True King who possesses everything, and yet gave up everything at the cross to save you. Who is committed, not just to cultivated fields, like here, but to your thriving, to your true, inner prosperity. To your rest - the rest that comes from knowing that, though you could never deserve it, because of him you are loved and accepted and so have nothing to prove.

And as you find your worth in him, precisely because you are unworthy of it, his love for you will seep into you, and influence the way you see life, even the small things of life like food and drink and work, and and you'll find joy in them. It'll even influence the way you see the quotidian drudgery, the *hebel* of life. Verse 20, 'For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.'

Live with an 'above-the-sun' view of life, a life open to God, that sees the life you have now as his gift, and the enjoyment you'll experience will largely blots out the *hebel* of life. Life will pass quickly, the Preacher says. *Not* because it's short, but because it becomes absorbing, because you

begin to see God and beauty and life and love in all the details; because there's so much to enjoy and so little time to do it in.

Augustine famously said, 'Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee.' Riches can never give you that rest. But God can and does, as you find your fit in the world. Because you were made to worship - it's just him you're made to worship, not wealth. And as you do, you'll find the power to enjoy everything else.

As Paul said, 'In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing *plenty* and hunger, *abundance* and need. I can do all things through him who gives me strength' (Phil 4:12-13).

So, let's go into the week to glorify God and enjoy him forever, and as we do, let's enjoy everything else as well.