



Ecclesiastes - Chapter Five

Summary of Chapter Five

People should be open to God. They should be ready to listen and not be so hasty to dictate what they want him to do. Solomon believed that it was not wise to make a vow to God and not keep it. It is better to not make a vow than to make one to God and not keep it. Again, Jesus teaches this very principle: *<<But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King>>* (Matthew 5:34-35).

Solomon says that riches are meaningless. People who are obsessed with wealth never find the true happiness that it promises. Loving money leads to sin: *<<For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains>>* (1 Timothy 6:10). A person should not depend on money to make them happy. Instead, they should use what they have for the Lord's work and glory.

V Ecclesiastes 5:1-20 - Reverence, Humility, and Contentment

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools; for they do not know how to keep from doing evil.

Ecclesiastes 5:1

Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Solomon here brings good advice that does not contradict his 'under the sun' premise. Even apart from eternity, it would be wise to honour God and walk prudently when one goes to the

house of God for the sake of this life alone. The Teacher will explain more of what this means in the coming lines. Yet generally it can be said that it means to show care and think about the consequences when one comes to meet with God.

To draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools. The sacrifice of fools is the hasty speech mentioned in the next lines. Solomon counsels people to come to the house of God to listen and hear rather than to speak without thinking. Derek Kidner commented, “Has the double force in Hebrew which it sometimes has in English: to pay attention and to obey. So this saying is close to the famous words of Samuel, ‘to obey (literally to listen) is better than sacrifice’ (1 Samuel 15:22).” Alexander Maclaren also observed, “They who fall into the faults condemned are ‘fools.’ If that class includes all who mar their worship by such errors, the church which holds them had need to be of huge dimensions; for the faults held up in these ancient words flourish in full luxuriance today.”

² Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few.

Ecclesiastes 5:2

Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few. Solomon rightly described the human tendency to speak without thinking before God and others. Even with an ‘under the sun’ premise, it is foolish to speak too much and hear too little in God’s presence: <<*Teach me, and I will be silent; make me understand how I have gone wrong*>> (Job 6:24), for: <<*It is a snare for one to say rashly, ‘It is holy’, and begin to reflect only after making a vow*>> (Proverbs 20:25).

The priests of Baal prayed hard and long on Mount Carmel; Elijah prayed short and sweet, and full of faith to the living God. God heard and beautifully answered Elijah’s prayer, since Baal does not exist he could not answer prayers no matter how long and fervent they were; refer to 1 Kings Chapter 18.

³ For dreams come with many cares, and a fool’s voice with many words.

Ecclesiastes 5:3

For dreams come with many cares, and a fool’s voice with many words. The thought in this line is probably well represented by the Living Bible: <<*Just as being too busy gives you nightmares, so being a fool makes you a blabbermouth*>>.

⁴ When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it. ⁶ Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake; why should God be angry at your words, and destroy the work of your hands?

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6

When you make a vow to God. The Teacher wishes to keep people from uttering rash or meaningless words during the worship of God (vv.1-2), and in particular he has in mind the careless taking of a religious vow as an act of piety: <<*If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not postpone fulfilling it; for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you would incur guilt. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not incur guilt. Whatever your lips utter you must diligently perform, just as you have freely vowed to the LORD your God with your own mouth*>> (Deuteronomy 23:21-23). By taking a vow, a worshipper would promise to perform a specific act, such as making a sacrifice, if God would respond favourably to a particular petition: <<*Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you'*>> (Genesis 28:20-22), <<*And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, 'If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the LORD's, to be offered up by me as a burnt-offering'*>> (Judges 11:30-31), and: <<*She made this vow: 'O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head'*>> (1 Samuel 1:11). Since making a sacrifice was costly, however, people often looked for some excuse to avoid following through with it.

Even with an 'under the sun' premise, it is both honourable and wise to honour God by keeping one's word to him. It would be better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not fulfil it: <<*When a man makes a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth*>> (Numbers 30:2), <<*But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the LORD!*>> (Jonah 2:9).

A commonly overlooked and unappreciated sin among God's people is the sin of broken vows - promising things to God and failing to live up to the vow. Those who honour God:

- Will not be quick to make vows to God.
- Will be serious about fulfilling vows made.
- Will regard broken vows as sins to be confessed and to be repented of.

Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not say before the messenger that it was a mistake. The Teacher rightly observed that it was important for God's people to regard their failure to keep vows as a serious matter, and that great effort should be put into keeping vows and not regarding the failure to keep them as simply an error.

⁷ With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God.

Ecclesiastes 5:7

With many dreams come vanities and a multitude of words; but fear God. Solomon counselled reverence and honour towards God, but in his 'under the sun' perspective the value is found in the here and now, not unto eternity: <<*I know that whatever God does endures for ever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him*>> (Ecclesiastes 3:14). Adam Clarke commented, "Most certainly, he that fears God need fear nothing else. Well may an upright soul say to Satan himself, I fear God; and because I fear him, I do not fear thee."

⁸ If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter; for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. ⁹ But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a ploughed field.

Ecclesiastes 5:8-9

If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and right, do not be amazed at the matter. The Teacher spoke realistically about life 'under the sun'. There is much oppression and perversion of justice. It should surprise no one: <<*The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths. Their roads they have made crooked; no one who walks in them knows peace. Therefore justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light, and lo! there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom. We grope like the blind along a wall, groping like those who have no eyes; we stumble at noon as in the twilight, among the vigorous as*>>

*though we were dead. We all growl like bears; like doves we moan mournfully. We wait for justice, but there is none; for salvation, but it is far from us. For our transgressions before you are many, and our sins testify against us. Our transgressions indeed are with us, and we know our iniquities: transgressing, and denying the LORD, and turning away from following our God, talking oppression and revolt, conceiving lying words and uttering them from the heart. Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance; for truth stumbles in the public square, and uprightness cannot enter. Truth is lacking, and whoever turns from evil is despoiled. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice>> (Isaiah 59:8-15), and: <<So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgement comes forth perverted>> (Habakkuk 1:4). Kidner observed, “For all his hatred of injustice, *Qoheleth* pins no hopes on utopian schemes or on revolution. He knows what is in man.”*

The violation of justice and right. In a world like this, it is no surprise to find officials violating justice.

The high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them. Solomon was especially aware of how bureaucracies can bring oppression. The political manoeuvring of sinful ruling officials results in suffering for the powerless.

But all things considered, this is an advantage for a land: a king for a ploughed field. Even with a complex and possibly corrupt bureaucracy, everyone depends on what comes from the farmer’s field - even the king. The Teacher seemed to delight in these ironies of life.

Introduction to Ecclesiastes 5:10-6:9 - Greed vs. Contentment.

The Teacher observes the destructive nature of greed and concludes that contentment is a key characteristic of the godly life in this world: <<*Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have*>> (Philippians 4:11), <<*Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these*>> (1 Timothy 6:6-8), and: <<*Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’*>> (Hebrews 13:5).

¹⁰ The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity.

Ecclesiastes 5:10

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money, literally silver. Of all people, Solomon knew that the gathering of riches did not satisfy: <<*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains*>> (1 Timothy 6:10). He knew this also is vanity. Kidner noted, "If anything is worse than the addiction money brings, it is the emptiness it leaves. Man, with eternity in his heart, needs better nourishment than this."

¹¹ When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes?

Ecclesiastes 5:11

When goods increase, those who eat them increase; and what gain has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Solomon knew that as one's net worth increased, so did ones expenses - and the expectation of others.

¹² Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep.

Ecclesiastes 5:12

Sweet is the sleep of labourers, whether they eat little or much; but the surfeit of the rich will not let them sleep. Solomon indulged an envy of the workers who has so much less to worry about. The rich man has greater worries and less sleep for: <<*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*>> (Mark 10:25). It may be supposed that Solomon found little sympathy from the working classes.

¹³ There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt, ¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture; though they are parents of children, they have nothing in their hands.

Ecclesiastes 5:13-14

Riches were kept by their owners to their hurt. Solomon then observed that wealth does not bless the life of every wealthy person. Especially those who keep their riches with an ungenerous, clenched fist, they are riches kept by their owners to their hurt. The owner endured hardship and sacrifice in order to acquire their wealth but was never able to enjoy it, as it was lost in a bad venture, so that he neither enjoyed his riches nor did anything worthwhile with them. To make matters worse, he had a family to provide for.

¹⁵ As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came; they shall take nothing for their toil, which they may carry away with their hands. ¹⁶ This also is a grievous ill: just as they came, so shall they go; and what gain do they have from toiling for the wind? ¹⁷ Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment.

Ecclesiastes 5:15-17

As they came from their mother's womb, so they shall go again, naked as they came. Solomon understood that great wealth ultimately means nothing 'under the sun'. Man comes with nothing into the world and leaves the same way. Job agreed: <<*He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there; the LORD gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD'*>> (Job 1:21). The NT gives a more hopeful picture, taking Christians beyond the Teacher's 'under the sun' premise and telling them that they can lay up treasure in heaven. No one can take their wealth or their gifts with them when they die; but they can send it on ahead by generous giving to God's work.

Besides, all their days they eat in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and resentment. This continues the story begun in v.13. The man's selfish, fearful greed resulted in a truly wretched life. With a sympathetic touch, Solomon reveals the loneliness, sorrow, and anger there is even for the very wealthy.

¹⁸ This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us; for this is our lot. ¹⁹ Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions and whom he enables to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and find enjoyment in their toil – this is the gift of God. ²⁰ For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

This is what I have seen to be good: it is fitting to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives us. It can be sensed that Solomon - still very much with the premise of 'under the sun' - simply hoped to make the best of a bad situation.

Likewise all to whom God gives wealth and possessions. Although the Teacher knew that riches did not bring true meaning to life, he was no fool. He understood that it was better to have wealth than to not have it, and 'under the sun', one should enjoy both wealth and the capacity to enjoy it as the gift of God: <<*Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and*

might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all>>
(1 Chronicles 29:12).

For they will scarcely brood over the days of their lives, because God keeps them occupied with the joy of their hearts. This was Solomon's counsel to the wealthy person who finds no ultimate meaning 'under the sun'. They should simply try not to think about it and keep themselves busy. This does not indicate an unreflective attitude toward life but simply means that the one to whom God grants contentment will not allow the darker realities of human existence to overshadow divinely bestowed blessings: *<<And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your households together, rejoicing in all the undertakings in which the LORD your God has blessed you>>* (Deuteronomy 12:7).