

APPROACHING GOD

ECCLESIASTES 5



A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

Approaching God: Ecclesiastes 5
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Ecclesiastes 5: Introduction

Solomon is offering contrasting visions of life, trying to discourage his wayward-leaning son, Rehoboam, from falling off the deep end of a materialistic and hedonistic approach to life. “Under the sun” life makes no sense, and ends up being vanity and chasing the wind. “Under heaven” we discover the true meaning and purpose of life, seeing all that comes to us as gifts from God to be used for His glory and our blessing.

We live continually under the eye of God. So we need to be careful how we live, what we say, and what we aspire to in life. God will bless those who embrace His framework for living; but He will actively oppose and disappoint those who try to make a go of life apart from Him.

In Ecclesiastes 5, Solomon offers practical advice for making the best use of our time and words in the presence of God.

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We hope you find this study of Ecclesiastes a challenging and stretching experience of journeying more deeply into the Word of God. Thank you for joining us.

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1 In the Presence of God

Pray Psalm 25.1-3.

To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, I trust in You;
Let me not be ashamed;
Let not my enemies triumph over me.
Indeed, let no one who waits on You be ashamed;
Let those be ashamed who deal treacherously without cause.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.1.

Prepare.

1. What is the context for this verse? How does it counsel us?
2. Are there other times when we are in the Presence of God?

Meditate.

Solomon injects a brief interlude (vv. 1-7) of instructions concerning how one should comport himself in the presence of God (verse 1 is actually Ecclesiastes 4.17 in the Hebrew Bible). It is both good advice and a solemn warning against professing faith, but not living it.

This is an “under heaven” section, even though that familiar phrase is not employed. The context of this passage is worship (“when you go to the house of God”). But, since we always live before the eyes of God, the advice here is relevant at all times.

Solomon instructs us to “watch your step” (NKJV: “walk prudently”; the Hebrew is literally, “guard your feet”) as you come before the Lord. We – chasers of vanity and feeders on the wind – are coming before the eternal, holy, unchanging, and sovereign God. We should be more inclined to hear from God than to think that our silly lives add anything to Him.

The “fool” goes casually through the motions of worship, offering sacrifices, singing songs, nodding (or nodding off) at the preaching, and making a good show to everyone present. But he does not understand that his superficial and self-centered worship is evil in the sight of God (cf. Ps. 50.16-23). The point of this introductory verse is to explain that coming before God is serious business. Come as a seeker, a listener, a receiver of His instruction and correction; and don’t kid yourself by thinking you add anything to God. True religion is grounded in revelation and obedience, not in our best efforts to please Him.

You can’t pretend with God. He simply won’t have it. But this is the way far too many people conduct their religious life, offering things to God – like going to church – and thinking that He is satisfied with their occasional efforts. By inserting this “under heaven” interlude at this point, Solomon keeps his primary theme before the reader, while using it to indict the shallowness of our religious lives.

Reflect.

1. How should you “watch your step” as you come before God in worship?
2. Why do we add nothing to God by anything we offer Him? So why does He allow us to make

such offerings (Rom. 12.1)?

3. Is it really possible to do evil and not know it? How can we avoid falling into that pit?

Address thyself to the worship of God, and take time to compose thyself for it. Keep thy thoughts from roving and wandering; keep thy affection from running out toward wrong objects. We should avoid vain repetitions; copious prayers are not here condemned, but those that are unmeaning. How often our wandering thoughts render attendance on Divine ordinances little better than the sacrifice of fools! Matthew Henry (1662-1714), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 5.1

O Lord, let my worship, and all my life, be open and sincere before You, so that I...

Pray Psalm 25.1-5.

Let these words put you in a receptive frame of mind, as you wait on the Lord to teach you His ways.

Sing Psalm 25.1-5.

Psalm 25.1-5 (*Festal Song: Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

I lift my soul to You; O Lord, in You I trust.

Let me not come to shame, nor let my foes o'er me exult.

All they who wait on You shall never come to shame;

Yet they to shame shall come who stand against Your holy Name.

Make me to know Your ways, teach me Your paths, O Lord!

My Savior, all day long I wait and seek You in Your Word.

2 Watch What You Say

Pray Psalm 25.4, 5.

Show me Your ways, O LORD;
Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You *are* the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.2, 3.

Prepare.

1. Solomon is still thinking about when we are “before God”. What advice does he give us here? Why?

2. Who is the fool in the Presence of God?

Meditate.

God, Solomon wants us to understand, pays attention to our words, so we should too.

In Psalm 50, God confronts hypocrites in the midst of their worship, insisting that they have no right, whether in prayer or singing, to take His covenant on their lips. The reason? They live like fools, not like pious people.

In Isaiah 1 God rejects all the elaborate rituals and offerings of a sinful people. He insists that what they were offering, He hadn’t required of them. He was looking for something else.

Jesus also condemned those whose religion consisted primarily in empty, self-serving words (Matt. 6.1-8).

Solomon’s point in these verses is that our posture before God should be one more inclined to *receive* than to *give*. Not that we should not speak at all – whether to pray, sing, or give testimony. Certainly, we should. But the words we offer to God should be few, and such as are appropriate in God’s Presence, and not just those we might “dream up” to impress Him – or others. Verse 3 is difficult: just as many words come from a fool, so dreams – here probably in the sense of low-level prophecy, and in parallel with “fool” – come not from God, but from the busyness of the day.

The temptation in our day is to treat public worship as an opportunity for drawing attention to ourselves, either by our many words and catchy tunes, displays in worship, self-serving testimonies, or long-winded sermons. Solomon counsels quiet and humility as the proper posture in the house of God, rather than much talking and gesticulating.

In a day when, for many churches, public worship has taken on more the atmosphere of a noisy concert than of silence and humility, Solomon’s words provide an opportunity for us to reflect, both on what we *are* doing in worship, and what we *should be* doing to worship “under heaven”.

James’ counsel that we should be quick to hear and slow to speak especially applies in the Presence of God (Jms. 1.19, 20).

Reflect.

1. Why should we observe more silence in worship? How does silence help us in worshipping God?
2. How could you tell when a worship service had too many words?
3. In your own worship, in your private time with the Lord, how much listening and how much talking do you do? How might you improve the amount and quality of your listening?

Knowing, then, how widely the divine nature differs from our own, let us quietly remain within our proper limits. For it is both safer and more reverent to believe the majesty of God to be greater than we can understand, than, after circumscribing his glory by our misconceptions, to suppose there is nothing beyond our conception of it. Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), *Answer to Eunomius's Second Book*

Help me to listen to You, Lord, not only when I'm in worship, but when...

Pray Psalm 25.1-7.

How will you *wait* on the Lord throughout the coming day? What do you expect to hear from Him?

Sing Psalm 25.1-7.

Psalm 25.1-7 (*Festal Song: Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

I lift my soul to You; O Lord, in You I trust.

Let me not come to shame, nor let my foes o'er me exult.

All they who wait on You shall never come to shame;
Yet they to shame shall come who stand against Your holy Name.

Make me to know Your ways, teach me Your paths, O Lord!
My Savior, all day long I wait and seek You in Your Word.

Remember mercy, Lord, and steadfast love to me!
And all my sins before You let them not remembered be!

3 Vow Wisely

Pray Psalm 25.10, 11.

All the paths of the LORD *are* mercy and truth,
To such as keep His covenant and His testimonies.
For Your name's sake, O LORD,
Pardon my iniquity, for it *is* great.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.4-7.

Prepare.

1. What is a vow? Did Solomon think we should take vows seriously?
2. Who doesn't take vows seriously? How does God look upon such people?

Meditate.

We might be surprised to discover how frequently we break the vows we have made, not merely *before* God, but actually *to* Him.

A vow is a solemn declaration, based on the evidence or promise of God's goodness, of something we intend to do as a result to show our gratitude to the Lord for His kindness to us. For Christians, the most common vows are those we take during the marriage ceremony, and those we take upon becoming church members. You might like to pull those out some time and consider to what extent you are living faithfully according to what you have solemnly vowed to God.

To break a vow is to sin, and even (v. 6) to risk the anger of God against our works. Words come easy to us, and so we don't always say what we mean or mean what we say. We shouldn't expect to be able merely to rationalize them away when confronted by someone in a position to call us to account ("the messenger").

Precisely because words *do* come so easily, we must be very circumspect about the words we speak, especially when those words relate to our worship and vows before the Lord. The proper attitude for taking a vow is fear of God, not simply to satisfy the expectations of others.

Rehoboam would take a vow upon becoming king over Israel. He must think very carefully about what it means to vow, and what can happen when we break our vows.

These first seven verses are a masterful construction on Solomon's part. They appear to get right at the heart both of Rehoboam's "religion" and of his need. Those – like Rehoboam – whose piety is merely a shell and a façade may think they're getting by all right with God and men; in fact, they are living in sin and setting themselves up for judgment from God.

The point of this interlude is to enlarge on Solomon's earlier comments about living "under heaven". This is not a calling we can fulfill in merely superficial ways. We must nurture true and genuine fear of God, as Solomon will remind us at the end of his book as well. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom; without the fear of God not only is there no wisdom, there is no true religion either.

And without the fear of God, we place ourselves at risk of His anger.

Reflect.

1. When do we take vows in church? Why do we do this? Do you think it would be a good idea to review our vows from time to time? Explain.

2. To make a vow then fail in carrying it out is to show oneself to be a fool (v. 4). Why does God have “no pleasure in fools”?

3. The mention of a “messenger” suggests some means of exercising oversight of God’s people in Solomon’s day. Why do God’s people need someone watching over them? Whose job is this in the church today? How should they do this? Do we have some overseeing responsibility toward one another? Explain.

For as unbounded glory hereafter is promised to those who faithfully serve God and cleave to him according to the rule of this system, so the severest penalties are in store for those who have carried it out carelessly and coldly and have failed to show to him fruits of holiness corresponding to what they professed or what they were believed by people to be. John Cassian (360-432), Institutes 4.33

Help me to be faithful in keeping my vows, Lord, especially today, as I...

Pray Psalm 25.8-10.

What vows have you taken unto the Lord? Use this time to review and renew them, and to prepare for living them more faithfully throughout the day.

Sing Psalm 25.8-10.

Psalm 25.8-10 (*Festal Song; Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

Upright and good are You, You lead us in Your way;
The humble You instruct in truth and guide him day by day.

The paths of God are all of love and faithfulness;
All they who keep His covenant the Lord will surely bless.

4 For the Good of All

Pray Psalm 25.12.

Who *is* the man that fears the LORD?

Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.8, 9.

Prepare.

1. These verses touch on matters of authority and responsibility. How do you see that?

2. What does the land represent in verse 9? What did Solomon say about the land?

Meditate.

Emily Dickinson described the art of poetry as “telling the truth slant.” Solomon is a master of the form. So many of his remarks are directed at Rehoboam – his vision of what he will be and have when at last he is king – but they are also “glancing blows” and have enough of generality to them to have wider applications.

Look at these two verses like this: Verse 8 – How great is the king’s responsibility? Whatever goes wrong in distant jurisdictions ultimately comes back to him. Verse 9 – How then to ensure a good reign? Work for the good of all those in your sphere of influence. Realize that you, like the people you serve, are dependent on the Lord and His blessings, and do your best to be fair and generous.

To kings the message is: Don’t abuse your power. To the rest of us it’s: Keep the good of everyone in mind, and not just your own interest.

These verses continue in an “under heaven” mode, as Solomon is trying to get Rehoboam to think in a larger perspective than the merely self-interested one he seemed to be adopting. By writing to his son in this indirect manner, Solomon invited him to think carefully about his words. If Solomon were to confront his son directly – “Grow up, son! You’re living like a fool! – he might expect that, rather than listen attentively and with interest, Rehoboam would probably get defensive and resist his father’s counsel.

Solomon’s method of teaching is in many ways like that of the Lord Jesus Christ. When we have wisdom to dispense and truth to convey, it’s a good idea to find ways of helping people receive our words with interest, so that they will think about them carefully.

Reflect.

1. Why does oppression occur? Should the fact of oppression concern us as Christians? Explain.

2. When do justice and righteousness become a perversion? Is this an issue that should concern Christians?

3. The earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord (Ps. 24.1). What does this suggest about the things He entrusts to us?

If, he says, you see among people those on the one hand who are oppressed and those on the other who do wrong in

judgment, and still others who practice justice, do not be amazed that this occurs as if there were no divine foresight. Rather, know that God guards everything through Christ... Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), Scholia on Ecclesiastes 38.5.7-11

I want to work my Personal Mission Field for the benefit of everyone today, especially as I...

Pray Psalm 25.10-13.

Seek the path of generosity, love, and patience for today. Seek the promises of God's covenant, and walk in all His testimonies. Pray to be a blessing to everyone today.

Sing Psalm 25.10-13.

Psalm 25.10-13 (*Festal Song: Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

The paths of God are all of love and faithfulness.

All they who keep His covenant the Lord will surely bless.

For Your sake, Lord, forgive. All they who fear You, Lord, shall know Your blessings day by day and follow in Your Word.

5 The Vanity of Riches (1)

Pray Psalm 25.14, 15

The secret of the LORD *is* with those who fear Him,
And He will show them His covenant.
My eyes *are* ever toward the Lord,
For He shall pluck my feet out of the net.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.10-12.

Prepare.

1. What is Solomon's view of great wealth? Does he think wealth is evil?
2. How does the honest laborer sleep, compared to the rich man? Why?

Meditate.

Any who may think to find satisfaction and fulfillment in riches and wealth need to think again.

Ask any winner of the lottery how many friends he suddenly has – and just how long they remain his friends. The allure of wealth is in what it can gain us. Once it has done its work in getting us things – all of which become boring and perish – the wealth we thought would bring us happiness is gone – and so are the friends.

The faithful laborer lives one day at a time and retires each night, content with a good day's work and an honest day's pay to go with it. The rich man tosses and turns on his bed, worrying about what will happen to his wealth. An alternate understanding of the last part of verse 12 might be that the rich tend to overindulge in the good things of life, and this can be unhealthy. Either way, if Rehoboam – or any of us – thinks he's going to be happy once he's rich, take it from Solomon, who's "been there, done that": this way lies vanity.

Solomon's admonition moves smoothly from superficial views of religion, to false views of power and influence, to misguided views about wealth. Each of these things is good in themselves – Solomon will get around to saying this at the end of chapter 5. However, as *ends* in themselves, they are deceitful, destructive, idolatrous, and even diabolical.

Our own age has been described as an age of materialism, relativism, narcissism, and superficiality. The manifest lack of happiness and peace, evident in so many ways, serves to confirm the wisdom in Solomon's warnings to his son, and makes Ecclesiastes all that much more important and timely for our day.

Reflect.

1. Money and wealth are not inherently evil; but they can become evil. How?
2. Should believers spend a lot of time worrying about whether or not they're going to have enough to meet their needs? Explain.
3. What does Solomon commend as the key to having a good night's sleep? Why do you think he says that?

An abundance of evil can be revealed in wealth. But this type of evil should be viewed as more of a weakness. Therefore, everyone who guards his wealth for himself does not know the wisdom of God, nor is his heart inclined to insight, nor to instructing his children. He has neither received the words of God's commandments nor has he hidden them in his heart.. Evagrius of Pontus (345-399), Scholia on Ecclesiastes 39.5.12-13

Lord, help me to desire contentment more than wealth, and help me to use the wealth You entrust to me to...

Pray Psalm 25.14-18.

Seek contentment from the Lord. Confess your sins, and seek His mercy for your shortcomings. Commit yourself and all you have to serving the Lord throughout the day ahead.

Sing Psalm 25.14-18.

Psalm 25.14-18 (*Festal Song: Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

Your friends are they who fear and seek Your holy face;
Your covenant with them You share and save them by Your grace.

Be gracious, Lord, to me; my heart is weighed with woe.
My troubles and affliction see; let my transgressions go.

6 The Vanity of Riches (2)

Pray Psalm 25.20, 21.

Keep my soul, and deliver me;
Let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in You.
Let integrity and uprightness preserve me,
For I wait for You.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.13-17.

Prepare.

1. How does seeking wealth become a thing of vanity and feeding on wind?
2. What “sever evils” does Solomon expose in these verses?

Meditate.

Solomon concludes his brief words of admonition concerning the vanity of riches. Wealth is uncertain, and it is a “severe evil” when the wealthy squander their riches on themselves alone (v. 13). “Under the sun”, all our best efforts at being good stewards can sometimes come to naught (v. 14). Economic uncertainties, unreliable partners, thieves and robbers, wrong-headed investments – all these and more can consume our wealth in a short space of time, leaving us nothing, and nothing to leave for our heirs (v. 15).

Solomon seems to be reminding his son that he needs to think about more than just himself. He will have children for whom he needs to provide (v. 14). Will trusting in wealth enable him to do that? He won’t live forever, and when he dies, he’ll leave this world as he entered it (v. 16). It is a grievous evil – and a source of much misery (v. 17) – to squander the stewardship entrusted to us from the Lord. We can’t take it with us; and if we consume it all now, seeking happiness by it, there will be nothing left for others. “Under the sun” this is all too often the case.

We can feel Solomon’s urgency in trying to get his son to think beyond his own selfish interests. He seems to be saying, “Think about how God sees you (vv. 1-7); think about your responsibilities to the people you will govern (or influence, vv. 8, 9); think about your children and the generations to come (vv. 10-17).”

In a narcissistic day such as ours, it can be difficult to get people to think beyond their own interests; nevertheless, we must try to help those who are inclined to mere self-indulgence – including ourselves – to consider the larger demands and opportunities their lives represent. There aren’t enough resources “under the sun” to help us find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life. Only by considering our lives according to God’s perspective, and living them within the framework of His truth, can we find the wisdom, satisfaction, and fulfillment we seek.

Reflect.

1. How should we manage our money and other wealth “under heaven” as opposed to “under the sun”?
2. Why do people suppose that they can find true happiness in material things? What would you say to someone who insisted this was true?

3. Why is it a “severe evil” (vv. 13, 16) to misuse the good gifts God entrusts to us?

If you are desirous of treasure, take the invisible and the intangible which is to be found in the heavens on high, not that which is in the deepest veins of the earth. Be poor in spirit and you will be rich, no matter what your worldly goods are. Ambrose of Milan (333-397), Cain and Abel 1.5.21

Thank You, Lord, for all the many good gifts you entrust to me daily. Help me to use them for Your glory as I...

Pray Psalm 25.11-15.

Focus on the Lord. Meditate on His covenant, and seek His way for the day ahead of you.

Sing Psalm 25.11-15.

Psalm 25.11-15 (*Festal Song: Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

For Your sake, Lord, forgive. All they who fear You, Lord,
shall know Your blessings day by day and follow in Your Word.

Your friends are they who fear and seek Your holy face;
Your covenant with them You share and save them by Your grace.

7 Contentment

Pray Psalm 25.4, 5

Show me Your ways, O LORD;
Teach me Your paths.
Lead me in Your truth and teach me,
For You *are* the God of my salvation;
On You I wait all the day.

Read Ecclesiastes 5.18-20.

Prepare.

1. How do work and its rewards fit into God's plan for us?
2. What's the key to keeping the busyness of our lives from causing us to "dwell unduly"?

Meditate.

Better to learn contentment "under heaven" than to be consumed with ambition "under the sun".

God gives us work and a measure of good things; we must learn to receive the gifts of God with thanksgiving, and to enjoy them for what they are, without allowing them to become gods themselves.

This is an essential aspect of life "under heaven", and it was clear to Solomon that, just as he had lost sight of this (Eccl. 2), his son was about to as well. "Try to keep your whole life in mind, son, and not just the fleeting happiness you are experiencing at the moment." This is the counsel Solomon offered in verse 20. But don't miss the phrasing: "God keeps *him* busy." God is sovereign in all our activities; even in our rebellion. Everything in our lives is according to the will of God, Who continually strives to draw men to Himself and to keep them from falling into the deadly consequences of their sinful desires (Gen. 6.3; Rom. 1.18-32).

Bad choices and practices flow from an improper orientation to life. When people believe that *they* are the final standard of what's good and right for them, all absolute morality goes out the window, and, with it, all sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of our neighbors.

Solomon's advice to Rehoboam is that he should never lose sight of God, never take His gifts for granted, never think that everything exists only for his own satisfaction, and never fail to keep in mind all his responsibilities and the opportunities for doing good that come with these. God will keep us busy, so that we use the gifts He gives us, and if we keep focused on Him, we will not "dwell unduly" in folly and vanity (v. 20).

That is, we should always see ourselves as approaching God, not only in times of worship, but in our work and every other aspect of our lives. Such wisdom can only be realized "under heaven".

Reflect.

1. God gives us many good gifts. Such as? What makes these gifts from God? What does He intend in giving them to us?

2. Much good can be realized from the work God gives us to do. Besides income, what else of good can work provide? Is the work God has given us to do more than the job at which we work? Explain.

3. What difference would it make if we regarded everything in our lives, and every moment of our lives, as gifts from God?

God gives wisdom along with the riches and capabilities inherent in wisdom, that is, wisdom's insights, so that people eat and drink from the things they have received: the bread of wisdom, its water, the wine, which he mingled into a cup. This is a gift from God. If one takes the spiritual in the right way, it is, finally, the grace of his lot. Didymus the Blind (313-398), Commentary on Ecclesiastes 164.1

Give me grace just now, Lord, to recount the many gifts You have given me, so that I...

Pray Psalm 25.1-22.

Try praying this psalm verbatim and out loud. Use just the words of this psalm, but as you do, think of the many gifts of God and consider the ways He will direct you in using those gifts today.

Sing Psalm 25.1-22.

Psalm 25.1-22 (*Festal Song: Revive Thy Work, O Lord*)

I lift my soul to You; O Lord, in You I trust.

Let me not come to shame, nor let my foes o'er me exult.

All they who wait on You shall never come to shame;
Yet they to shame shall come who stand against Your holy Name.

Make me to know Your ways, teach me Your paths, O Lord!
My Savior, all day long I wait and seek You in Your Word.

Remember mercy, Lord, and steadfast love to me!
And all my sins before You let them not remembered be!

My sins have been of old, Your love is new each day;
according to Your goodness, Lord, regard my sinful way.

Upright and good are You, You lead us in Your way;
the humble You instruct in truth and guide him day by day.

The paths of God are all of love and faithfulness.
All they who keep His covenant the Lord will surely bless.

For Your sake, Lord, forgive. All they who fear You, Lord,
shall know Your blessings day by day and follow in Your Word.

Your friends are they who fear and seek Your holy face;
Your covenant with them You share and save them by Your grace.

Be gracious, Lord, to me; my heart is weighed with woe.
My troubles and affliction see; let my transgressions go.

Consider all my foes, who hate me all the day;

and rescue my poor soul lest I should stumble in the way.

Preserve me in Your way, redeem Your people, Lord!
We wait for You and refuge seek in Your own faithful Word.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Solomon suggests that if our worship of God is superficial, our lives will be as well. Explain.
2. Solomon says we should consider work and its rewards as gifts from God. What difference will it make if we do?
3. Solomon wants us to consider those we will leave behind when we depart this world. What is our responsibility to them?
4. He constantly emphasizes the folly of making material rewards our aim in life. Why is this good advice? How can we tell when we are beginning to seek satisfaction and fulfillment in things, rather than in the Giver of every good gift?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Ecclesiastes 5? How are you putting that lesson to work in your Personal Mission Field?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.