

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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by William D. Barrick, Th.D.
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary

Chapter 5: Beyond the Sun

From **observation**,
the Preacher **learned that God has a design for all things** (3:1–5:20).

Consumed by his search for meaning in life “under the sun,” Solomon first notes that God had “set eternity” in the human heart (3:11). Then he indicates that God will right the wrongs and provide justice (3:17). Throughout chapter 4 the author focuses on the ongoing issues of everyday life which demonstrate that individually and corporately people cannot resolve their most persistent problems.

Solomon’s investigations lead him to a consideration of mankind’s relationship to God. Swindoll opens his examination of Ecclesiastes 5 with the following thought:

So many of Solomon’s ideas and observations are horizontal musings . . . the bitter, barren, boring side of life seen through disillusioned eyes. But on a few, rare occasions the man breaks out of his cynical syndrome. At those times his comments contain a remarkable vertical perspective that scrapes away the veneer of empty religion and takes us back to the bedrock of a meaningful relationship with the living Lord.¹

Each individual must realize that God’s involvement in his or her life consists of more than afflicting people with “a grievous task” (1:13; cp. 3:10) and providing work, food, enjoyment, wisdom, and knowledge (2:24–26).

Therefore, each person “under the sun” must anticipate an encounter with the eternal God beyond the sun. What does that look like? *How does one prepare for life beyond the sun?* Solomon takes up the topics of **worship** (5:1–3), **vows** (5:4–6), **the fear of God** (5:7), **justice** (5:8), and **money** (5:10–17). Each topic reveals something about one’s relationship to God, who provides a greater companionship in life (cp. 4:7–12).²

Approaching the Presence of God (5:1–3)

Solomon observes that too many of God’s covenant people approach worship with

¹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Living on the Ragged Edge: Coming to Terms with Reality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 146.

² Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 97.

a lackadaisical attitude. He notes **a lack of true reverence for the holy and for the Holy One Himself**. Each act of superficial worship reveals this truth. According to Hubbard, “the Preacher wanted to remind his hearers of the greatness of God who could see through any extravagance in prayer. Wild promises, unguarded commitments, vain repetition were all to be avoided. Poise, control, measured speech and action were considered expressions of sound conduct by the wise.”³

Verses 1–3 contain a series of **four commands**: “Guard your steps” (v. 1a),⁴ “draw near to listen” (v. 1b), “Do not be hasty” in word or thought (v. 2a), and “let your words be few” (v. 2b).

Guarding Our Steps (v. 1a)

“Guard your steps [lit., feet] as you go” might mean that the worshiper should *prepare for worship by obeying God beforehand* (Ps 17:4–5; Prov 4:20–27). Gathering for public worship must not be taken lightly. The saints must enter the Temple with reverence.⁵ Barton’s paraphrase warns, “Do not run to the place of worship thoughtlessly, or because it is the fashion to go frequently, but consider the nature of the place and thy purpose in going.”⁶ As in Christ’s statement in **John 4:23–24**, *we ought not approach worship lightly nor without intentional preparation in heart, head, and hand (or, foot!)—we must worship in spirit and in truth*.

“**The house of God**” occurs throughout the Old Testament in reference to a place of worship. Jacob used the phrase to identify the site where he dreamed about a ladder to heaven (Gen 28:17). The Tabernacle was designated “the house of God” (Judg 18:31; 1 Chron 6:48) and the Temple of Solomon also bore this title (1 Chron 22:2; 2 Chron 3:3). Any who are tempted to make the synagogue the reference must, of necessity, take the following reference to sacrifices as figurative, since the Jews did not offer sacrifices at synagogues.

The gathering of the saints for public worship in our own day equates well with the setting in Ecclesiastes. *Obedience to the Word of God in private life prepares the believer for participation in public worship*. What a sweet spirit of praise would prevail in our churches if we all arrived thus prepared.

Drawing Near to Listen (v. 1b)

Solomon instructs those who worship in the Temple to listen when they come for worship. **Listening presupposes a spoken word**. The worshiper comes to hear God’s Word from God Himself or from His chosen spokesman. Kelley points out that, “To listen is to obey. To state the matter thus is to specify Who is to have authority over man’s life. It is to be God, and God alone.”⁷ Listening and obeying the Word of God take

³ David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Preacher’s Commentary Series 16 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1991), 131.

⁴ The English versions’ 5:1 is 4:17 in the Hebrew text. Thus, the numbering throughout chapt. 5 differs between the two (e.g., the English 5:2 is the Hebrew’s 5:1, etc.).

⁵ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 310.

⁶ George Aaron Barton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes*, International Critical Commentary (1908; reprint, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1971), 122.

⁷ Michael Kelley, *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), 95.

place only through submission to Him as Sovereign Lord of one's life. "Draw near to listen" echoes "Go near and hear" in **Deuteronomy 5:27**, which specifically identifies God as the speaker and the commitment of the hearer to do what God commands.

In contrast, someone might offer "**the sacrifice of fools**" (v. 1). This might refer to bringing an unqualified sacrificial animal or to offering without the correct heart attitude (cp. 1 Sam 15:22; Prov 15:8; 28:9; Heb 11:4). By context, *it appears to depict someone going through the motions of offering a sacrifice while spewing a torrent of empty words, but not possessing any awareness of God. Matthew 6:7–8* offers a similar critique of wordy worship. Kelley suggests that the reference is to an unruly, noisy, hasty, and self-centered irreverence that refuses to submit to God's word.⁸

"**Fool**" occurs three times in this chapter (vv. 1, 3, 4). In all three appearances, the Hebrew word is *k^esil*, which denotes "one who is dull and obstinate" and normally refers to a person's "chosen outlook, rather than his mental equipment."⁹ This "fool" (1) does not engage in a pursuit of wisdom (Prov 17:16), (2) manifests a spiritual, rather than mental, problem (Prov 1:29), (3) enjoys his folly (Prov 26:11), (4) has no reverence for truth (Prov 14:8), and (5) is a menace in society (Prov 13:20; 17:12; 18:6).¹⁰

One take on the final clause's meaning is that the fools "go from their sacrifices with an easy conscience to plunge again into evil."¹¹ "Who sin without a thought"¹² represents yet another interpretation. Longman argues that it means "that they are so foolish that they are not even aware that their sacrifices are evil, an offense to God."¹³ Thus, the best translation is the simplest: "**they do not know that they are doing evil**" (NAU, RSV, NKJV, ESV, NIV). In other words, they are so dull of spiritual understanding that they actually think that they are doing something good and acceptable.

Avoiding Hastiness (v. 2a)

The first caution against haste addresses **the mouth**, but the second one addresses **the heart** (literally, "do not let your heart hurry to cause a word to go out before God"). Biblical wisdom literature warns against hasty words and actions (Eccl 7:9, "eager"; 8:3; Prov 10:19; 20:21; 21:5; 25:8; 28:20, 22; 29:20; Ps 115:3). *Hastiness begins in the thoughts then proceeds to the mouth*. Solomon exhorts worshipers to discipline their minds and their mouths. God is present everywhere, so the worshiper must always live with that reality, even outside the Temple.

Limiting Our Words (v. 2b–3)

By declaring that "**God is in heaven,**" Solomon indicates the dwelling-place of God. However, the statement refers to perspective more than to distance. **God is above and beyond this world—beyond the sun.** His greatness exceeds anything this world has to offer. Therefore, biblical prayer does not seek to manipulate God the way idolaters

⁸ Kelley, *The Burden of God*, 96.

⁹ Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (1964; repr., Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1972), 40.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Barton, *Ecclesiastes*, 122, 123.

¹² Iain Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001), 116 and NEB.

¹³ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 151.

attempt to do with their deities. Prayer provides the believer with the opportunity to speak openly with the Lord of all creation. When Jesus taught His disciples how to pray, He also referred to God being in heaven (**Matt 6:9**).

The “**dream**” might be nothing more than “day-dreams, reducing worship to verbal doodling.”¹⁴ “**Much effort**” (v. 3) identifies what distracts an individual from the proper exercise of worship and causes the increase of hasty words. Context indicates that the meaning probably involves the thought that “many have delusions of their competence before God and acceptability to him.”¹⁵ The reader of the New Testament cannot but be reminded of **James 1:19**, “*This* you know, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak *and* slow to anger.”

Apprehending Promises to God (5:4–7)

In this next section, *the commands* include: “do not be late” in fulfilling the vow (v. 4), “Pay what you vow” (v. 4), “Do not let your speech cause you to sin” (v. 6), “do not say . . . that it was a mistake” (v. 6), and “fear God” (v. 7). These verses address the matter of making vows.

Even in the New Testament, Christians make vows (Acts 21:23). The Apostle Paul himself took a vow (Acts 18:18). Jesus taught His disciples about unconditional integrity and truthfulness in Matthew 5:33–37 that does not rule out making promises for serving God. Christians must maintain a life of integrity. If anyone makes a vow, he or she must fulfill it in order to maintain integrity of life and word in God’s presence.

Jephthah’s vow (Judges 11) stands as one of the most well-known examples of a rash vow. Exhibit “A” in the matter of insincere or deceptive promises has to be the case of **Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1–11**. See Deuteronomy 23:21–23 and Proverbs 20:25.

Biblical vows primarily involve dedicating or giving things to the Lord. One vows to give oneself, a child, money, animals, or sacrifices. Rash vows most often involve saying something is “holy” (Prov 20:25) that probably should not be considered as such. Rash vows could be reversed (Num 30:6–8). *Since the New Testament believers are priests of God (1 Pet 2:9), they have the spiritual authority to nullify their own rash vows.* Every believer must remove all foolishness from his or her life and pursue wholesome speech (Eph 4:29) and thoughts (Phil 4:8). Have you been guilty of making a rash promise to God? Determine not to make such vows again.

Fulfilling Commitments (vv. 4–5)

The message of these two verses stands out clearly. **Believers should keep their promises to God—without delay.** Only a fool makes promises that he cannot or that she should not have made. Resist making vows in times of trial. If, however, you do make a vow, know that God expects you to fulfill it.

Meaning What We Say (v. 6)

Who is “**the messenger**” in this verse? Potential identifications include the angel of the LORD, a prophet (cp. Hag 1:13; Mal 3:1), a priest (Mal 2:7), or a priest’s messenger.

¹⁴ Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 53.

¹⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 311n119.

In ancient Israel, believers would inform the priests of their vows and the priests (or priests' agents) would remind the individual and even receive any sacrifices that had been promised).

In this situation a person tells the messenger that it was all **“a mistake,”** an inadvertent error (cp. Lev 4:22–35; Num 15:22–31). Vows should be intentional, not unintentional. God finds no pleasure in foolish promises. Claiming an error in such a situation is tantamount to admitting that the vow was made in haste. *The results, when God judges or disciplines such foolish people can be catastrophic—even resulting in the destruction of the work of one's hands.*

Fearing God (v. 7)

“Many dreams” and **“many words”** fall into the category of empty things—things with no purpose, no value, or no meaning. *Vows made on the basis of such dreams and words result in purposeless, empty prayer.*

Most Christians find it difficult to describe what **“fear God”** means. Does it mean to be afraid, to have reverential awe, or to mortify the flesh or crucify self? If we cannot define it, how can we exercise it? Since “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov 1:7), our knowledge faces a severe deficit without it. No wisdom exists apart from “the fear of the LORD” (Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). In addition, Scripture associates blessing with the fear of God (Pss 112:1; 115:13; 128:1, 4). *Without “the fear of the LORD,” therefore, an individual lacks knowledge, wisdom, and blessing.*

God reveals in His Word exactly what comprises “the fear of the LORD.” Biblically, the fear of God includes the following six elements:

- 1) Trust God completely (Ps 115:11).
- 2) Experience God's forgiveness in reality (Ps 130:4).
- 3) Delight in God's Word (Ps 112:1).
- 4) Go beyond delighting in God's Word—obey it (Ps 119:63; Eccl 12:13).
- 5) Hate evil (Prov 8:13).
- 6) Steadfastly hope in God's loyal love (Ps 147:11).

The second of these six elements identifies true believers as the only individuals who can fear God (cp. Acts 2:38; 10:43; 26:18; Eph 1:7).

Understanding the Role of Rulers (5:8–9)

Ecclesiastes 5:8–20 focuses on the issue of money. Rulers and the oppression they sometimes practice relate directly to money or, more properly, lack of money. The rich and powerful often oppress the poor, because the poor cannot afford to defend themselves. Justice grinds too slowly, costing the poor an increasingly high amount of money. They cannot afford to wait in their situation and cannot afford financially to speed up the process.

The successive tiers and levels of bureaucracy result in officials watching out for one another (v. 8). The mutual protection makes it difficult to root out corruption.¹⁶ Sometimes that watching involves checks and balances that enable government to operate efficiently and justly. However, all too often those successive levels of governmental provide a means of sharing bribes that are distributed up the chain by the original recipient, who keeps but a small part of it for himself. One ought not be shocked that

¹⁶ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 312.

such things exist within a bureaucracy—it is merely the outcome of fallen human nature. **Government comes with a price (1 Sam 8:4–18).**

Verse 9 contains multiple interpretive issues. The major issue involves the relationship of the king to the cultivated field. Eaton believes that the lesson to be learned is that “bureaucratic officialdom does not totally override the value of kingly authority.”¹⁷ In other words, despite the presence of oppression and corruption in a monarchy, there is yet an advantage to having a king. Therefore, citizens ought not be too hasty about overthrowing him. As Kidner puts it, “even tyranny is better than anarchy.”¹⁸ With a slightly different take on the text, Kaiser takes the view that the text refers to ruler and people being “happiest when they both realize that they are served by the farmed fields.”¹⁹ Basically, this view echoes 1 Samuel 8:10–18. *The king protects the land and its private possession by the nation’s citizens.* In other words, a text like Proverbs 23:10–11 comes under the domain of the king’s authority.²⁰

Dealing with the Pursuit of Money (5:10–17)

Money leaves human covetousness unsatisfied (v. 10), attracts hangers-on as self-styled dependents and presents opportunities for gaining more money (v. 11), disturbs one’s peace (v. 12), places an individual in greater jeopardy because of the potential for experiencing a greater loss (vv. 13–15), and fails to help anyone avoid death (vv. 16–17). Solomon employs a chain of proverbs to speak of money and the impact it has upon people’s lives.

Salary raises and bonuses produce more income, but increased income draws the attention of family and friends who wish to help spend it (v. 11). The more the income, the bigger the celebration and list of invitees—thus, the increase in spending. Of course, as long as government levies taxes, an increase in income also results in an increase in taxes. In addition, the increase in wealth can cause increased responsibility in growing the business—channeling the profits back into the growth of the business by adding equipment, employees, employee benefits, increased marketing, building expansion, etc. *The truth is, we always manage to live up to our income—and beyond. It is never enough.*

Two biographical samples highlight the contrast between having riches and not having riches (v. 12). *The poor working class individual sleeps soundly even on beans and rice, but insomnia afflicts the wealthy even on a full stomach.* The word used for “**the full stomach**” in verse 12 comes from the same root as the word for “**satisfied**” in verse 10. One would think that the banquet of the rich would bring some degree of satisfaction. The irony of it is that it does not bring satisfaction—instead, his full stomach will keep him awake, disturbing his rest.

Some people tend to hoard their financial gains, never investing them in the lives of others or themselves (v. 13). Others engage in risky investments that result in leaving their families without adequate support (v. 14). Most biblically literate people recognize verse 15 as one of the more familiar verses in Scripture when it comes to the topic of money. **No one takes their money with them when they die—they all go empty-**

¹⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

¹⁸ Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance*, 55.

¹⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman’s Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 76.

²⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 218.

handed (cp. Ps 49:10, 17). Paul cites this concept indirectly in **1 Timothy 6:7** in the context in which he commends godly contentment and warns against the love of money (vv. 6–10).

Since a person enters this world without any material wealth and leaves this world in the same condition, of what use is laboring for and gathering material possessions and money (Eccl 5:16)? **“Vexation, sickness and anger”** accompany the wealthy as they eat in darkness (v. 17). Vexation refers to the burdensome cares of this life. Sickness indicates the physical toll on the laborer. Anger identifies the emotional outcome of the frustration of ambitions, becoming the target of other ambitious people, and the failure of one’s plans to come to fruition due to economic downturns, governmental interference, cruel competitors, and industrial spies.

Concluding Thoughts Regarding Money (5:18–20)

Though the experiences Solomon describes in verses 8–12 produce a sense of hopelessness and frustration, a remedy exists. The key word in this section is **“God.”** All of those experiences take place “under the sun” apart from God. Solomon had observed those who included God in their worldview and how that impacted their enjoyment of life, despite its ups and downs, its times of want and times of abundance. God desires that people enjoy His gifts, whether as a poor individual (v. 18) or as a wealthy individual (v. 19).

“To eat, to drink” involves sharing the enjoyment of fellowship and being satisfied with that which God has given, regardless of the amount. The historian identifies the same aspects of life in his description of the glory days of Solomon’s reign (**1 Kgs 4:20**). During those early years of Solomonic splendor, power, affluence, and influence, the nation prospered. Its citizens were contented and happy. Things were good because Solomon was still serving the Lord and honoring Him in all that he did. Perhaps Solomon remembers those years with nostalgia and writes of them in Ecclesiastes 5:18–20. Verse 19 makes it clear that wealth itself is not the problem. As Paul writes, “the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil” (1 Tim 6:10). Elsewhere, the apostle also addresses the matter of living with a contented attitude whether in want or in prosperity (Phil 4:12; see also Matt 6:19–24).

In his book *Business for the Glory of God*, Wayne Grudem states that

In fact, *money is fundamentally good* because it is a human invention that sets us apart from the animal kingdom and enables us to subdue the earth by producing from the earth goods and services that bring benefit to others. Money enables all of mankind to be productive and enjoy the fruits of that productivity thousands of times more extensively than we could if no human being had money, and we just had to barter with each other.²¹

Consider the following factors that describe money:

- It is more widely accepted than bartered goods of any kind (including food).
- It lasts longer than most goods.
- It is more transportable than other goods.
- Everyone is willing to exchange goods for money.
- It stores value until exchanged or spent.

²¹ Wayne Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God: The Bible’s Teaching on the Moral Goodness of Business* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 47 (emphasis his).

- It “makes voluntary exchanges more fair, less wasteful, and far more extensive.”²²

As good stewards of our finances, we can employ money to glorify God. Whenever we give to the Lord’s work or to those who are in need, we exercise a rulership over the things of this world (cp. Gen 1:28). *In giving to others we imitate God’s mercy and love.* By our wealth we can expand and strengthen Gospel ministries worldwide in order to bring others to salvation in Christ.

What Solomon teaches in Ecclesiastes 5 matches what the apostle Paul teaches in his epistles. **Both Old and New Testaments agree that contentment and joy accompany those who think and live with a perspective beyond the sun, rather than limiting themselves to what is “under the sun.”** As Eaton so aptly states, “Secular man may live a life of drudgery, but for the God-centred man it will be otherwise.”²³ Ecclesiastes does not exude skepticism and pessimism. Instead, it proclaims a need for godly satisfaction with that which God has given. The apostle Paul makes the same observations and proclaims the same teachings—confirming the accuracy of Solomon’s observations and the integrity of his conclusions.

The closing verse of this chapter declares that God will keep a person “**occupied with the gladness of his heart**” (v. 20). “Occupied” represents the same word translated “afflicted” in 1:13 and “occupy” in 3:10. Here the usage appears to be more positive by context. There may even be a hint of a play on words. The same word can also be translated “answer.” *This God-given joy is His answer to the affliction of the endless exercise of labor by which a person ekes out a living “under the sun.”* People ought not spend their time bewailing lost ventures or joylessly hoarding their gains—they must occupy themselves with matters of the heart, especially God-given and animated gladness. According to Daniel Estes, “When humans enjoy life as God’s gift, they remain aware of their mortality, but they are not oppressed by the thought of it. This enjoyment enables humans to keep life and death in the proper perspective.”²⁴ David’s prayer in **Psalm 4:5–8** leaps to mind as a fitting conclusion for the study of Ecclesiastes 5.

Questions:

- How can we prepare ourselves for worship on Sunday mornings?
- What causes us to sometimes speak or act too hastily?
- What kinds of vows would be legitimate for New Testament believers?
- In what ways is Solomon qualified in writing a critique of a monarchy?
- Why is the love of money the root of all sorts of evil?
- What good qualities does money possess?
- What produces godly contentment?
- What can you do this week to enhance the gladness of your heart?

²² Ibid., 49.

²³ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 104.

²⁴ Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 334.