

God is in Heaven, but You are on Earth (Eccl. 5:1–7)

By Jacob Gerber

Among the books of the Bible, Ecclesiastes is unique. In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher conducts a thorough search of the whole world, attempting to see if there is anything here that could provide happiness, satisfaction, joy, or salvation. The goal is not so much to give us the right answer as to eliminate every possible wrong answer we might mistakenly adopt. As such, Ecclesiastes is pre-evangelistic, clearing away the many errors that cloud the judgment of people to keep them from embracing the Jesus Christ with their whole heart, soul, mind and strength.

There are, however, a few minor exceptions in this book, where the Preacher turns his attention away from life under the sun to consider our relationship to the One who sits enthroned above the sun. Ecclesiastes 5:1–7 is one of these passages, where the Preacher considers the obligations that human beings have toward God. Even so, this passage does not give a full account of the hope we have through faith in Christ. Indeed, this passage considers only the most basic fundamentals for religious life, especially by noting the wide chasm that stands between human beings here on earth and God who is in heaven. As such, the Preacher’s main burden is to remind us, *do not take the name of the Lord in vain*.

Hear God (Eccl. 5:1–3)

Up to this point, the Preacher has largely given us his observations and reflections on the nature of life under the sun. At every turn, he has illustrated from every conceivable angle the fact that, under the sun, all is vanity.¹ Here in Ecclesiastes 5, the Preacher gives us his first admonitions and exhortations.² Relatedly, this is the first place where the Preacher will address his readers directly, with the 2nd person pronouns, *you/your*,³ Here we find the one area of life that is *not* vanity—entering into the house of God to worship him.⁴ I believe that Duane Garrett’s organization of this passage is correct, with a pattern of two parallel segments in vv. 1–3, and then vv. 4–7a, where the pattern consists of a positive statement (v. 1, 4), a negative statement (v. 2, 5–6), and then a proverb warning against multiplying big dreams (v. 3, 7a)—followed finally by the conclusion to fear God (v. 7b).⁵ Also, there is a particular warning in this passage against acting like the *fool*.⁶

¹ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 96.

² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 49.

³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 94.

⁴ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 97.

⁵ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 310.

⁶ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 49.

Positive: Guard Your Steps in the House of God (Eccl. 5:1)

In the first of the two parallel segment, the positive admonition is, “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God” (v. 1a). We should remember that Solomon was the one to complete the construction of the temple, which is called the “house of God” (e.g., 2 Chron. 3:3).⁷ That the temple is in view here is also clear from the warning against offering the “sacrifice” of fools.⁸ In relation to the temple, the word *guard* is extremely important.⁹ In the first temple, the garden of Eden, Adam was charged with *guarding* the garden (Gen. 2:15). Then, when Adam and Eve sinned, God stationed cherubim at the entrance of the garden of Eden to *guard* the way to the tree of life (Gen. 3:24). Much later, God commissioned the Levites to *guard* the entrance to the tabernacle, lest any outsider come too close to God’s holy dwelling place (Num. 1:53).

Here, the Preacher urges worshipers to *guard* their own steps when they approach the house of God. In the context of the rest of the verse, this has a very specific meaning: “To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil” (v. 1b). Derek Kidner’s observation on this admonition is apt: “Whereas the prophets hurl their invective against the vicious and the hypocrites, this writer’s target is the well-meaning person who likes a good sing and turns up cheerfully enough to church; but who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets round to what he has volunteered to do for God.”¹⁰ We *should* go to the house of God, but we must go (as Walter Kaiser notes) with a disposition that is ready to *listen* to what God has to say through his word, rather than with a readiness to *tell* God something.¹¹ To *listen* to God means not only to *pay attention* to him, but to *obey* what he commands us to do.¹² The “sacrifice of fools,” then, either refers to offering sacrifices without due reverence to God (i.e., without faith), or with idle speaking in God’s house.¹³

Negative: Do Not Be Rash with Your Mouth (Eccl. 5:2)

As the corollary to the first verse of what “you” *should* do, the Preacher now says what “you” should *not* do: “Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God” (v. 2a). Within the context of the previous verse, the idea seems to be that thoughtless/careless behavior (i.e., the opposite of guarding one’s steps) will lead to rash and hasty words before God. As Roland Murphy writes, “When applied to speech...the usual result of thoughtless activity will be just words, and often too many of them (see Eccl 10:14a).”¹⁴

To reinforce the point, the Preacher reminds the readers that “God is in heaven and you are on

⁷ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 112.

⁸ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 95.

⁹ On the priestly use of “guard,” see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 17 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

¹⁰ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 52.

¹¹ Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 115.

¹² Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 53.

¹³ For the former position, see Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 63; for the latter, see Kaiser, *Coping with Change*, 116.

¹⁴ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50.

earth. Therefore let your words be few” (v. 2b). The point is not that God is *distant* from the worshiper, as though being in heaven meant that God did not care about our prayers.¹⁵ Instead, the point is that God is great, and we are small, so that wisdom would require us to come before God with a clear sense of humility.¹⁶ We must ever keep in mind that we are not in control of the situation when we enter the presence of God.¹⁷ While God condescends to come near to his people, we must never think that we can approach him casually.¹⁸

Proverb: The Fool’s Words are as Insubstantial as Dreams (Eccl. 5:3)

In v. 3, the Preacher summarizes the wisdom of the first two verses: “For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words.” The specific sense of the *dream* in this verse is disputed. Duane Garrett does not believe that these dreams refer to literal dreams experienced during sleep, but is used metaphorically for those who fantasize about doing great things (i.e., “He has big dreams”).¹⁹ Benjamin Shaw does believe that these are literal dreams we experience while sleeping. Even so, Shaw argues that these are not the important, meaningful dreams that we sometimes find in Scripture, which God uses to reveal prophetic revelation (e.g., Gen. 37:5–7), but the frustrating, sleep-disturbing dreams.²⁰

Within the context of Ecclesiastes, I think Roland Miller’s explanation makes the most sense: “The dreams indicated here are neither nightmares nor revelations. The term *dream*—which occurs twice in this unit (5:3, 7) but nowhere else in the book—can express that which is unreal, worthless, or short-lived, that is, insubstantial or transient (Job 20:8; Ps 73:20; Isa 29:7; Sir 34:1–2; and esp. see its use alongside *hebel* at Zech 10:1–2). The sense of Ecclesiastes 5:3, then, would be as follows: Just as the (insubstantial) dream comes with many cares, so also the fool’s voice is accompanied by *many* (insubstantial) *words*.”²¹ Don’t let your words be as insubstantially vain as your fleeting dreams in the night.

Fear God (Eccl. 5:4–7)

In the second of the parallel segments, the Preacher deals with vows in worship. The instruction is not *that* we should make a vow, but that, if we do make a vow, that we should *fulfill* whatever we have vowed.²² So, in the *positive* statement, the Preacher declares, “When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you owe” (v. 4). This is a restatement of what Law teaches: “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for

¹⁵ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 95–96.

¹⁶ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 114.

¹⁷ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 311.

¹⁸ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 101.

¹⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 311.

²⁰ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 63.

²¹ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 96.

²² Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 107.

you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth” (Deut. 23:21–23).²³

Negative: Don’t be Foolish and Sin by Unfulfilled Vows (Eccl. 5:5–6)

Even in Deuteronomy 23, we do not see any obligation *that* someone should make a vow, and if someone refrains from vowing, that person will not be guilty of sin (Deut. 23:22). The only problem occurs when someone vows to do something, but does not do it. Such people are “fools” (Eccl. 5:4), and the Lord will surely require their vow from them (Deut. 23:21). This echoes the *negative* statement of v. 5: “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.” There is much wisdom in refraining from vowing, but it is dangerous business to vow something that you have no intention of paying.

So, in v. 6, the Preacher warns not only of being foolish by failing to fulfill vows, but of sin: “Let not 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 voice and destroy the work of your hands?” The word for “messenger” is the same word that is sometimes translated as “angel” (including the “angel of the LORD”), but here this means either a priest (cf. Mal. 2:7) or a messenger sent by a priest to collect the vow.²⁴ When it is time to pay up what one has vowed, it is not enough to say that it was a mistake. Such a response will anger God, and lead him to destroy the work of one’s hands. Pay your vows.

Proverb and Conclusion: Let the Fear of God Displace Vanity (Eccl. 5:7)

Once again, the Preacher’s proverb at the end of this second parallel segment focuses on dreams and words: “For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity” (v. 7a). That is, when our words grow as numerous and as insubstantial as our multiplying, fleeting dreams in the night, this is vanity—insubstantial, meaningless, and worthless. To underscore this point, the Preacher concludes this section with a short exhortation: “but God is the one you must fear” (v. 7b). As Benjamin Shaw observes, the “fear of the Lord” is not some kind of terror or phobia, but, rather, “the fear that arises when one realizes that it is the Creator of the heavens and earth with whom one is dealing....It is a faith that acts in obedience to God on the basis of divine promises. A careful examination of the ‘fear of God’ passages in the Old Testament reveals that the ‘fear of God’ is the equivalent to ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ in the New Testament.”²⁵ By a true, living, active, reverential faith, we learn to deal with God in truth—not multiplying our words and vows as though they were meaningless, insubstantial dreams, but guarding our steps (and our words), listening to his word, and quickly fulfilling all that we have promised him that we will do.

Discussion Questions

1) On the whole, how much does this passage reveal about God—his character, his work of creation, his work of redemption, his love, or the hope we have of through the gospel of Jesus? How much of this passage is distinctly Christian? Why do you think that is? How does this fit in with the larger

²³ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 50.

²⁴ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 115.

²⁵ Shaw, *Ecclesiastes*, 62.

pattern in this book of considering life under the sun? How can even these (largely general) religious principles inform how we consider our place in this universe?

2) What does the Preacher mean when he warns us to guard our steps when we go to the house of God (v. 1)? Why is the Preacher so interested in exhorting us to listen (v. 2)? What is the danger of being rash and hasty in our words before God when we enter into worship (v. 2)? What is the significance of the Preacher's reminder that God is in heaven, and that we are on earth (v. 2)? How should this warning shape the way that we approach worship each Lord's Day?

3) Why do you think that the Preacher concerned with the vows that we make (v. 4–5)? What kinds of vows did worshipers make under Old Testament worship? What kinds of vows do we make in New Testament worship? How seriously does our culture take the idea of keeping our word, and doing what we have promised to do? Where do you see that laxity about vows influencing the life of the church? Where does it affect your life?

4) What does it mean to “fear” God (v. 7)? Why should we not understand this as meaning that we should be afraid of God? How, instead, does this relate to what the Bible elsewhere describes as faith? Why is fear so essential to the understanding of faith? How does the notion of fear relate to the trust that God calls to put in him? What hope does the Christian have that can strengthen and empower our fear of the Lord? How does Ecclesiastes help to fill out our understanding of faith?