



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

In chapters 5 and 6, Solomon instructs his readers and the topics of worship and wealth which are *hebel* (vanity) if undertaken or enjoyed in a selfish or ungodly manner.

Fear God

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Qoheleth describes how worship itself can be vain if not done in a way that is honourable to God. In chapter 5, the worshipper approaches the temple in Jerusalem without an attitude of reverent fear. The admonition is to “*guard your steps*” when going to the house of God. In Exodus 3:5 God instructs Moses from the burning bush: “*Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.*” God is completely holy and must be approached in a way that shows him the reverence he deserves.



Solomon warns against using too many words when approaching God and advises that listening is better than offering sacrifice. Listening equates to obedience and echoes the words of 1 Samuel 15:22, “*...Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.*”

God’s people must understand that God is in heaven and they are on earth. God is wholly other and restraint is needed when approaching him. He is wearied by too many words; probably referring to formalistic, lengthy, and thoughtless prayers.

- 1. What do “rash” words tell us about the worshipper in 5:2-3?**
- 2. What does Jesus teach in Matthew 6:7 and how does this relate to what was happening in Ecclesiastes?**

Dreams can come when a person is too busy, too stressed and filled with anxiety; likewise foolish utterances come when a person speaks too many rash words when approaching the God of Creation.

- 3. What is the meaning of “reverence” and how might Christians today approach God irreverently?**
- 4. Is it easier to speak to God or to listen to Him? Explain your answer.**

Vows were not a common part of Israelite worship and neither were they commanded, but in the days of Solomon they had risen to take on a mistaken importance.¹ Vows were made rashly and were not always kept.

5. What does God say about vows in Deuteronomy 23:21-23?

6. Do Christians today make vows and if so how and when?

It is far better to never make a vow than to make a vow and fail to keep it. This is described by Solomon as foolish and sinful. Solomon goes on to describe how some go to the “messenger” which was probably the priest to claim that their vow had been a mistake. The messenger did not have the authority to release a person from a vow made to God. These unkept vows anger God and bring punishment.

This making of vows was often a means of trying to manipulate God into doing (or not doing) something. It might be a promise to God that the worshipper would do a certain act for him if only God would provide something in return. These vows tried to force the hand of God and were foolish. These vows coupled with irreverent worship and many words were vanity.

The conclusion of Solomon is this: Worshipers should stand in awe of the powerful and holy God and fear him.



7. What does it mean to “fear God”?

The Vanity of Wanting More

Ecclesiastes 5:8-20

In 5:8-9, Qoheleth describes a scene of oppression of the poor and a violation of justice and righteousness in the province. This injustice could easily provoke discouragement and anger among the poor. While Solomon expects his readers to practice justice, he instructs them to not be amazed when they witness miscarriages of justice.

In the land one corrupt official is watched over by another corrupt official, who is in turn watched over by a third, and so on. The entire bureaucracy is one of rampant greed and corruption. At the top, however, is a king who rules over all and brings about a certain stability in the midst of chaos. There is debate about whether verse 9 refers to God or to an earthly king. If the meaning is God (which seems likely) then the verse teaches that God is over all, watching over the agriculture of the land, and providing for them while reminding them that everyone will eventually answer to him.

In 5:10, we turn our attention once more to the vanity of trying to gain and hoard wealth. If your desire is for the gain of money, then you will eventually be disappointed not only because you will

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 746.



never find full satisfaction, but because wealth itself can bring misery. The wealthy have many cares including providing for servants or employees as well as the constant pressure of creditors and debtors. The only satisfaction the wealthy man may enjoy is in observing his wealth and this may be a fleeting joy.

8. Describe the sleep of the labourer versus the sleep of the rich.

Solomon next describes a situation where the wealthy man suffers a great financial loss in a bad venture. We can only speculate exactly how the man lost his money, but it could have been a bad investment, or a faulty partnership, or a mistimed business expansion. Since the man lost all his money he had nothing to pass on as an inheritance to his son.

9. What is the meaning of 5:15?

5:16 asks a rhetorical question that expects the answer of a resounding no. There is no gain in the toils of those who work for self. Their fortune can be lost in a myriad of ways and even if they are not lost in this life, they cannot be transferred to the next.

The man who seeks after worldly wealth (and especially the one who loses it) is described in dramatic detail in verse 17. He “eats in darkness” illustrating his frustration, aloneness, and despair. He is vexed, and sick, and angry at this situation. He is experiencing the full effect of *hebel*.

Even though wealth that is greatly loved and hoarded brings grief, the godly man should enjoy those things with which God blesses; even the physical things of this world.

10. How does Solomon describe “toil” in 5:18-20?

“There are two ways that people demonstrate discontentment. The first is in their constant effort to acquire more (5:8-12). The second is in their attempt to hoard what they acquire (5:13-17). In verses 18-20, Qoheleth now offers the counterpart of this ‘gross sickness.’ To those who do not spend their lives seeking, pursuing, devouring, and acquiring, God gives enjoyment.”²

Truth

“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. 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. For he will not much remember the days of his life because God keeps him occupied with joy in his heart.”

(Ecclesiastes 5:18-20 ESV)

² Bland, Dave L. *The College Press NIV Commentary: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, & Song of Songs*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 2002), 344.