

Ecclesiastes 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 5 Do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools.

Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow, than that you should vow and not pay. 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? For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity. But God is the one you must fear.

If you see in a province the oppression of the poor, and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them.

But this is gain for a land in every way, a king committed to cultivated fields. He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income.

[1 : 22] This also is vanity. When goods increase, they increase who eat them. And what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? Sweet is the sleep of a labourer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep.

There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun. Riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand.

As he came from his mother's womb, he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand. This also is a grievous evil.

Just as he came, so shall he go. And what gain is there to him who toils for the wind? Moreover, all his days he eats in darkness, in much vexation and sickness and anger.

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.

[2 : 27] 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. In Ecclesiastes chapter 4, the preacher focused upon the vaporousness of human society and its dynamics, our horizontal relationships.

Now at the beginning of chapter 5, he turns to our relationship with God, our vertical relationship, as it were. We can observe a parallel between verses 1 to 3 and verses 4 to 7.

They are two sets of teaching concerning cultic actions that need to be taken mindfully, sacrificing, and making a vow. Both of these teachings are followed by a strange proverb concerning dreams.

The preacher here warns against the danger of thinking that going through the motions is enough, that a mechanical and unmindful attitude to worship is sufficient, that sacrifice and other cultic actions can substitute for moral integrity and a heart ordered towards God, or that good intentions that don't give birth to actions suffice.

[3 : 38] The teaching here is similar to teaching we find elsewhere in scripture, in James chapter 1 verses 19 to 20 for instance. Know this, my beloved brothers, let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Guarding the tongue and ruling one's spirit are chief among the hallmarks of wisdom. Circumspection in our approach to worship is particularly singled out by the preacher as a crucial occasion for the expression of these traits.

When we enter into the house of the Lord or join with his people for our sacrifice of praise, we are entering into his intentional presence by which he is with us to judge and to bless.

Consequently, we must be very cautious and not rashly draw near to our own judgment and destruction. The preacher's warning here anticipates the Apostle Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 27 to 31.

Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

[4 : 49] For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.

Warnings about inappropriate and reckless worship are common in the scriptures, and also elsewhere in the wisdom literature. For instance, in Proverbs chapter 15 verse 8, the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is acceptable to him.

And the similar verse in chapter 21 verse 27, The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. How much more when he brings it with evil intent? That the preacher especially focuses upon the tongue, and our need to be guarded in speech and worship is noteworthy.

Worship can so often be filled with our own words, words that come rather too easily to our mouths. For the preacher, however, worship should be a place of mindful listening, first and foremost, of guarded speech, and weighty utterance.

When we speak in worship, we should not speak lightly, but ought to speak as those who will be judged by, and held to, what we declare. A particular case of our need to guard our speech is seen in the case of the vow.

[6 : 03] The danger of rash vows is well illustrated by the story of Jephthah and his daughter. Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 21 to 23 also cautions against taking vows without recognising their weight.

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 you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God what you have promised with your mouth. As in the teaching of verses 1 to 2, the warning makes clear that the Lord does not suffer fools.

If you are entering into his presence, you must be in earnest. There is no requirement that you must take a vow, as Deuteronomy points out, so don't be hasty to make one.

If you make a vow, you haven't sinned. Indeed, you might have done something very good. However, it places a heavy responsibility upon you to fulfil what you have declared that you will do.

[7 : 05] The person who vows rashly will bring judgment upon himself. The cryptic proverbs concerning dreams of verses 3 and 7 punctuate these two sections of teaching.

The meaning of these two statements is difficult to determine. Verse 3 might refer to the way in which people can imagine great deeds that they might perform, when they would never put in the effort required to make those dreams materialise, meaning that the dream remains a dream.

The fool's speech is like this. He is full of empty words that never come into reality. Verse 7 makes a similar point. The more that people are given over to an imagination divorced from action, the more their words will multiply.

Words come easily for such dreamers, because their words are hollow and light. However, the wise man weighs his words and speaks prudently when he isn't carefully holding his tongue.

This is all the result of the fear of the Lord. It's the awareness of the Lord's presence that causes us to be careful about what we say, and not to speak rashly or thoughtlessly. At the beginning of the previous chapter, which Daniel Frederick suggests forms a unit with verses 1 to 9 of chapter 5, the issue of oppression was raised.

[8 : 17] Again I saw all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and behold the tears of the oppressed, and they had no one to comfort them. On the side of their oppressors there was power, and there was no one to comfort them.

Here in verses 8 to 9 we return to this theme. Oppression is not something to be astonished at. However, there are limits upon oppression. The preacher particularly draws attention to the fact that oppressors are often under others who watch over them, and may perhaps remove them from their office, or punish them for their injustice.

And even if no human judge will establish justice in such situations, ultimately the Lord watches over all, and he will bring all deeds to account. The king committed to cultivated fields might be a way of speaking of the king who manages his realm well, removing the weeds of unjust judges from it, and planting faithful rulers in their place.

Fredericks notes the structural parallels between verses 10 to 12 and 12 to 20, which he argues belong with verses 1 to 9 of chapter 6, three sections dealing with the temporary character of wealth.

He also, however, offers an alternative structure, which presents verses 10 to 12 as the introduction, and verses 13 to 20 are paralleled with chapter 6, verses 1 to 9.

[9 : 36] The common structure can be seen as follows. There is an evil, followed by riches possessed and riches lost. Second, begetting, having nothing, and then coming and going.

Third, what advantage from toil, no satisfaction, and then the theme of contentment, with which the section ends. The person who is a lover of money will not ultimately find it satisfying.

Greater wealth increases responsibilities. It increases hangers-on, fair-weather friends, and the expectations and demands of others. Besides all of this, wealth provokes others' envy and their desire to take advantage of the wealthy man, to defraud him, to steal from him, or otherwise to part him from his wealth.

The wealthy man may well struggle to enjoy untroubled sleep. By contrast, the laboring man, who makes a subsistence living, may sleep with few worries and enjoy contentment.

The apostle Paul seems to allude to this passage in 1 Timothy chapter 6, verses 6 to 10, where he explores the same points. But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world.

[10 : 45] But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. Having enough and being content is true wealth.

Verses 13 to 17 present us with a specific instance of the vaporous character of wealth. A man who loves and hoards wealth, yet who loses it all in an unwise venture and has nothing left to leave to his son.

He has devoted his entire life to the pursuit of money and ends up with nothing whatsoever to show for it, his son being left without any inheritance either. We might think here of Jesus' parable concerning the rich fool and the danger of covetousness in Luke chapter 12.

It is death especially that exposes the emptiness of such pursuit of wealth. The soul of the rich man was required of him by God and all of his wealth was of no use to him at that point.

[11 : 55] Similar warnings about laying up treasure on earth where it can be lost to thieves and corruption or to failed ventures are given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Verses 18 to 20 with which the chapter concludes are like chapter 6 verse 9 which concludes the parallel section in counselling contentment.

By pursuing contentment in God's good gifts in the midst of our labours, whether we are rich or poor, we will know peace and joy in our work, enjoying our lot rather than constantly fretting to change it in a way that will never really bring true satisfaction.

The person who cannot find satisfaction and contentment in a small sufficiency will struggle to find it in much wealth. A question to consider.

What is money? What does it stand for? Why do we so pursue it? What are some of the ways that the Bible demythologises money, helping us to think about it more accurately?