

God is the One You Must Fear

Ecclesiastes 5: 1 – 7¹ (and various)

Solomon's Life as Context

As we noted a couple of weeks back, one of the most important things to keep in mind when reading and studying Ecclesiastes is that it comes to us in the context of Solomon's life. And, he began so well. First Kings chapter 3, verse 3 tells us that

³ Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father... ^{1 Kings 3:3 (ESV)}

And, of course, we know the Lord appeared to him when he was young, saying:

¹² ...Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you. ^{1 Kings 3:12 (ESV)}

Still more than that, First Kings 9, verses 1 – 5:

¹ As soon as Solomon had finished building the house of the LORD and the king's house and all that Solomon desired to build,

(so, roughly 20 years later)

² the LORD appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. ³ And the LORD said to him, "I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you have made before me. I have consecrated this house that you have built, by putting my name there forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time. ⁴ And as for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my rules, ⁵ then I will establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised David your father, saying, 'You shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel.'" ^{1 Kings 9:1-5 (ESV)}

Of course, the next two verses have a bit of a qualifier:

⁶ But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, ⁷ then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. ^{1 Kings 9:6-7 (ESV)}

Then, in short order we come to First Kings chapter 11:

⁴ ...when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. ⁵ For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. ⁶ So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and did not wholly follow the LORD, as David his father had done. ⁷ Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. ⁸ And so he did for all his foreign wives, who made offerings and sacrificed to their gods.

⁹ And the LORD was angry with Solomon, because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice ¹⁰ and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the LORD commanded. ^{1 Kings 11:1–10 (ESV)}

Which is to say, he forgot his own first principle, recorded for us in Proverbs 1, verse 7:

⁷ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. ^{Proverbs 1:7 (ESV)}

The Fool Says...

Of course, this makes sense because “**The fear of the Lord** is the beginning of knowledge...” and in contrast, Psalm 14:

¹ The fool says in his heart, “There is no God...” ^{Psalm 14:1 (ESV)}

And notice, this declaration is “in his heart”. There are many who would say, “Well, I believe in God...”, but the heart would tell a different story. “Fools”—those who say in their heart, “there is no God”—are those who despise wisdom and instruction. In other words, a heart which has turned away from God, whatever the mouth may say, is a heart that refuses to hear the wisdom and instruction—the Word—of God. Thus Solomon, who without doubt would have *claimed* faith in God throughout his life, came to deny that profession in his heart as increasingly he turned to the things of the world rather than the wisdom of God in his search for meaning. I believe that’s why there’s so much tension in Ecclesiastes.

God had blessed Solomon. He gave him

²⁹ ...wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, ³⁰ so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. ^{1 Kings 4:29–30 (ESV)}

And He also gave Solomon both riches and honor, so that no other king could compare,ⁱⁱ But like so many people both before and after him—like so many people today—Solomon seems to have become enamoured with the gift to such an extent that he ignored the giver. In the scriptures that come between what we considered last week and what we have read this morning, Solomon appears to have been setting up worldly objections to his conclusion in 3 14:

¹⁴ ...that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. ^{Ecclesiastes 3:14 (ESV)}

He spoke of wickedness in both the place of justice and the place of righteousness—perhaps the throne and the temple in his day (Ecclesiastes 3: 16 – 17). He spoke of the hopelessness of life in light of the inevitability of death (3: 18 – 22). He spoke of oppression, and toil, and envy (4: 1 – 8), and, at the end of chapter 4, he wrote:

¹³ Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice. ¹⁴ For he went from prison to the throne, though in his own kingdom he had

been born poor. ¹⁵ I saw all the living who move about under the sun, along with that youth who was to stand in the king's place. ¹⁶ There was no end of all the people, all of whom he led. Yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 (ESV)

This, perhaps, a reference to Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, whom God raised up because of Solomon's sin. This "poor and wise youth" would eventually tear the Northern Kingdom from the hands of Solomon's son,ⁱⁱⁱ but his line would eventually end in ignominy. God revealed this to Solomon in 1st Kings 11, and I think it may have been the remembrance of all this that led to the conclusion,

Surely this also is vanity and a striving after wind. Ecclesiastes 4:13–16 (ESV)

"O be careful little feet..."

But it also led to an admonition to the intended audience (possibly Solomon's own sons), and to us. In light of it, the jaded old King wrote,

¹ **Guard your steps when you go to the house of God.**

"O be careful little feet where you go..." Be careful not to turn aside when you are making your way to the house of God (which, in our day, is "the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth").^{iv} Don't get sidetracked by lesser concerns.

To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. Ecclesiastes 5:1 (ESV)

wrote one who was well-versed in doing just that—one who toward the end of his life and for all his supposed "wisdom", offered the sacrifice of fools over and over again.

Let Your Words be Few

But he went on:

² **Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth.** Ecclesiastes 5:2 (ESV)

Which is kind of Solomon's way of saying, "God is God, and we are not." He is in heaven—He sees and knows all things. For all that we sometimes act as though the Bible were merely an ancient religious text that has long been left in the dust of human progress,

⁸⁹ **Forever, O LORD, Your word is settled in heaven. ⁹⁰ Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides.** Psalms 119:89–90 (NKJV)

² **...Therefore...**

as Solomon wrote,

let your words be few. Ecclesiastes 5:2 (ESV)

Which is a solemn injunction for those who would approach God, whether in worship or in prayer. Jesus said something similar in His introduction to the prayer He taught to His disciples. Matthew 6, verses 7 and 8:

⁷ “And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. Matthew 6:7–8 (ESV)

² ...Therefore let your words be few. ³ For a dream comes with much business, and a fool’s voice with many words. Ecclesiastes 5:2–3 (ESV)

And, speaking of words, verse 4:

⁴ When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for he has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. ⁵ It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay.

Which should go without saying, because, verse 6...

⁶ 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?

Remembering, of course, that God had promised to do exactly this when He appeared to Solomon at the dedication of the temple.

⁶ But if you turn aside from following me, you or your children, and do not keep my commandments and my statutes that I have set before you, but go and serve other gods and worship them, ⁷ then I will cut off Israel from the land that I have given them, and the house that I have consecrated for my name I will cast out of my sight, and Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples. ⁸ And this house will become a heap of ruins... 1 Kings 9:6–8 (ESV)

Solomon seems to have forgotten that at some point. So many people were praising him for his wisdom and wealth that he forgot where all of these things had come from.

⁷ For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity...

(the dreams and the words are mere vapor, a mist that vanishes away),

...but God is the one you must fear. Ecclesiastes 5:6–7 (ESV)

God Is the One You Must Fear

And this is now the second time that Solomon has brought us to what will be the ultimate conclusion of this book. God is the one you must fear. So, guard your steps. Make sure they lead you to the place of worship. Let your words be few. God knows what you need before you ask Him, so listen before you speak. And do not let your mouth lead you into sin, because in this broken world we struggle to keep the words that we speak so easily, but the promise of God stands firm. So, let us draw near. It’s true, God is in heaven and we are on earth, but

¹⁹ ...we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh... Hebrews 10:19–20 (ESV)

²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

And as we draw near this morning to listen to His promise, spoken at the table of the Lord,

²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:21–25 (ESV)

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
ii Cf. 1 Kings 3: 13.
iii Cf. 1 Kings 11: 9 – 13; 26 – 40.
iv Cf. 1 Timothy 3: 14 – 15.