

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

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Date: 25 October 2026

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[0:00] Okay, so we are in the book of Ecclesiastes. We're in Ecclesiastes chapter 5, which is page 673. Let me pray for us as we come to God's word. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we want to pray now as we come to look at your word.

We ask for your help. We know, Lord, that we find it hard to concentrate at times. It is distracting towards the end of the day.

We are hungry for what you say to us. So please feed us from your word, we ask now in Jesus' name. Amen. When Oggy said to me that he was going to be with us this evening, I did plan on then saying a bit less because I knew that that would take up a bit of time.

So we have a bit less time this evening, but that's okay because I'm only going to say one thing and we're only going to focus on just the first seven verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 5.

So let me begin by reading them to us. Please ask you chapter 5, verse 1. Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.

[1:16] Do not be quick with your mouth. Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth. So let your words be few.

A dream comes when there are many cares and many words mark the speech of a fool. When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools.

Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you to sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger. My vow was a mistake.

Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore, fear God.

Now, like I said, I am going to try and show you just one point from these verses, which I think flows out into a couple of things practically for us.

[2:19] But before we get into that, let's have a brief review of where we are up to in the book of Ecclesiastes. If you've not been with us over these last few weeks, don't worry. In the first week, we looked at this word meaningless.

Meaningless, the preacher's favorite word, not the preacher in general, the preacher of Ecclesiastes' favorite word. It occurs 37 times in his book, depending on exactly how you count it. And we discovered that meaningless, as Ecclesiastes has it, is not a sort of nihilistic angst, or there's no point to anything, I think. Rather, it is that there is an absence of any substance to things. Everything is kind of mist-like. You can't grab a hold of it. Life is, says the preacher, meaningless. It slips through your fingers. The temporary nature of life hangs over everything that we do with an ever-deepening shadow, draining any weighty significance from the things that we are involved in. So life is meaningless. It just slips through our fingers. Now, that idea might seem a little bleak, or maybe even a little far-fetched. So in chapter 2, you encounter the preacher trying to fix the problem.

[3:30] And he shows us various different things that he has tried to kind of nail life down or to add substance to it. So he talks about wisdom and pleasure and wealth and work.

And he goes through all of those and shows you and me that they are unable to provide any solid ground on which to live our lives. The wise and the rich, and even the happy, die, meaning their lives too are missed.

The hard-working, if you remember, they work so hard and they achieve so much, and then they hand it over to someone who is a fool who wastes it all, which is meaningless, he says, vaporous. Then in chapter 3, if you scan back to chapter 3, you'll find the most famous section in the book of Ecclesiastes, which is there is a time for everything. And literally the point here is that we are given

the building blocks of time, seasons for everything.

A season for this and a season for that. But the problem is that deep down in our hearts, we want more than just time. The Lord has put eternity into our hearts.

[4 : 39] And so actually we find it, so that's in chapter 3, verse 11, he has set, also set, eternity in the human heart. So you're given the building blocks of time in your hands, but eternity is in your hearts.

So we're always longing for more. Doesn't matter, does it, whether you go to the funeral of a young person or the funeral of a very old person. The feeling in the room is that their life has been taken too soon.

They longed for more and life was too short. There should be more, but there's not. And times pass quickly, taking with them anything that we build. So nothing we produce or make or earn or possess lasts.

The writer then contrasts that in chapter 3 with God. God, he says, is the one who builds what lasts. What God does endures forever, chapter 3, verse 14. And that enduring God brings into judgment what we do.

Every deed of our lives is weighed by the God of justice. And we gain nothing from our toil, but it is held to account by the God who has eternal plans and builds eternal things.

[5 : 45] So what are we to do, right? We have time in our hands. We have eternity in our hearts. And only God builds anything that lasts. So what do we do? Well, chapter 3, verse 12.

There is nothing better than to eat, drink, and find satisfaction in your work. Now remember, this isn't because all there is is eating and drinking. This is not eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die.

Rather, it's not that that is all there is, but that is what there is. This is what God has given to us for this moment. These are gifts to be enjoyed from God, really as a way of enjoying the giver himself. So we enjoy the food, the drink, the work that God has given to us. Now, a couple of weeks ago, we then thought, well, how do we enjoy those gifts that God has given?

What is the best way to enjoy the things that God has given us in this life? Answer? Community. Community. The best way to enjoy what God has given is to enjoy them with others, because you cannot enjoy them alone.

[6 : 47] Now, that's like a really quick whiz through the chapters. Perhaps we can put it together in a sentence. I think this is what we've learned so far. Eternity is in our hearts, but only time is in our hands.

So enjoy the gifts of this time by enjoying them in community. That's, I think, what we've learned so far. Eternity is in our hearts. Time is in our hands.

So enjoy the gifts of this time by enjoying them in community. Now, that's where we're up to at the end of chapter 4. Chapter 5, verses 1 to 7.

And I am the most excited, I think, about these verses. But maybe that won't quite come through. But I think it introduces us to one more thing that we're to do in life in this world, this mist-like, meaningless life.

Yes, we're to enjoy the gifts, because those are what we've been given. But the other point here is, I think, we are to seek the giver. This is the one point for tonight. Seek the giver. That's it.

[7 : 45] Seek the giver. Now, before we look at the detail of this, hopefully you can see why that would just make sense, right? If eternity is in our hearts, and only time is in our hands, and all that we do is destroyed in death, and only what God does lasts, then surely the only satisfaction for our hearts is found in an eternal God, right?

Nothing else will satisfy. Now, we need to be careful here. This is not everything is meaningless except for Christian service. You know, seeking God is not the same as serving God.

Rather, the point is that this life contains nothing that will satisfy the eternity longings of your heart, except God. So seek Him. Augustine famously said in his book, *The Confessions*, which is worth you reading if you've never read it, Augustine's *Confessions*.

He says, Thou hast made us for thyself. You have made us for you, O Lord. And our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.

That's the point. Because eternity is in our hearts, and time is in our hands, and everything we do vanishes, and God is eternal, and He is building what lasts, only God will ultimately be satisfying to you and to me.

[9:03] Now, let me show you that from the passage. I've printed the passage out on the front of your handout, so you can perhaps look at it there with me. And you see that it begins and ends with reverence to the Lord.

So guarding your steps up to the temple in verse 1, I think is essentially the same as fearing the Lord in verse 7. Guard your steps when you go to the temple or to the house of God.

Therefore, fear the Lord at the end of verse 7. And the point is that really in this world of mist, there is this solid eternal reality called God, who is really to be honored and revered.

Now, it's slightly ironic, isn't it? In our vapor-like lives, where we cannot hold on to anything solid and nothing satisfies, then we find that the thing that is really solid is the eternal God who has no body, who is spirit, who is invisible to our eyes, who verse 2 tells us lives in heaven.

In other words, God, the eternal planner and worker, is not like you and me. You would think, wouldn't you, as material beings, we would find ultimate satisfaction in material things.

[10:11] But actually, the message of Ecclesiastes is we have eternity in our hearts, and we only find ultimate satisfaction in the God who has no body, who is in heaven.

So God is spirit and not flesh. He is heavenly, not earthly. He is creator, not created. And so what does it look like, then, to fear God or guard your steps? Well, here, then, are the two ideas.

For a start, fearing God means, number one, listen, don't speak. Listen, don't speak. It's repeated throughout, isn't it? Verse 1, go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools who do not know that they do wrong.

Verse 2, do not be quick with your mouth. Do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. Again, verse 3, many words mark the speech of a fool.

Again, in verse 7, much dreaming and many words are meaningless. There's a story told by a friend of mine of an enthusiastic law student who turned up at his church one Sunday morning.

[11:23] And in the part of the church service where they were to greet those around them, this enthusiastic young law student turned to the person next to him, and he said, you know, I'm a lawyer. And then this young student said, what do you do?

He said, oh, yes, I'm in law as well, he said. Anyway, so the young enthusiastic law student regaled this older gentleman with all the latest things that he'd been learning and reading as a student, hoping to give this, you know, old-timer a bit of up-to-date knowledge.

At the end of the service, the vicar greets the law student at the door and says, oh, it was good to see you sitting next to the attorney general this morning. To which he had that sinking feeling like, I should have just kept my mouth shut, right?

Now, that's the sense here. In coming to the Lord, we are coming to the one solid eternal reality.

The God who is, as Oggy was telling us, not just the best of all gods, but the one and only God.

The one and only who builds for eternity as king. The one who does not share our mist-like existence, but who lives forever in the glories of heaven. And in his presence, the best thing to do is keep your mouth shut.

[12:36] Keep your mouth shut. Perhaps really we could summarise this part of fearing the Lord as awe. I think that's what that word means, is it?

Awe is when you see something awesome, you just kind of gaze at it, don't you, when you don't say anything. You are speechless. And that's what's going on here.

It's a silent awe of who God is, that he's not like us in his greatness and his majesty. This God has what we really need, and we can only find it in him.

And that fact and reality should fill us with awe, awestruck silence. If you're into book recommendations, you've had one already, the Confessions. Second one, a little book by Paul Tripp called Awe.

It's a yellow book. And in it, he details the problems that come when we don't have this kind of awe of God. And his basic premise in the book is that we have lost a sense of awe of God. And he says this, you don't have to look very far to see awe problems everywhere around you.

[13:35] Adultery is an awe problem. To the degree that you forget God's glory as the creator of your body and his place as owner of every aspect of your physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual personhood, to that degree it is easier to use the members of your body to get whatever pleasure your heart craves.

Debt is an awe problem. When your mind is blown away by the thought that God provides everything that you have, that every good gift really comes from him, you are predisposed to be a

good steward of the things that he has provided.

Obsession with the collection of possessions is the result of an awe amnesia that makes you ask of things, what you will only ever get from the God of glory, who alone can satisfy your searching hearts.

Living for power and control is an awe problem. When you live with the rest and peace that come from keeping the power, authority, and sovereignty of God before your eyes, you don't need to work yourself into control over the people, situations in your life.

Gluttony and obesity are an awe problem. When you forget the glory of the satisfying grace of the Redeemer, you are susceptible to letting things like food and drink become your temporary replacement messiahs.

[14 : 50] Fear of man is an awe problem. When I forget that God's glory defines not only him, but who I have become as his child, I look to the people to give me meaning, purpose, and identity.

The awe war is everywhere. That's the writer's point here. When you come into the presence of the Lord, shut up and look up. That's what you need to do.

But it's not just that we need to be silent. There is another application of this seek the Lord, and this is what not to do, and it is don't make rash promises.

Look at verse 4. When you make a vow to God, don't delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools. Fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it.

Do not let your mouth lead you into sin, and do not protest to the temple messenger. My vow was a mistake. Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? Here the fool assumes in the sort of awesome presence of God that I've got to do something for this God.

[15 : 53] I've got to promise something. It's almost like the sort of fussing Martha in Luke 10 who assumes that really the thing that she actually needs to do is provide everything for Jesus rather than sit at his feet and listen to him.

That actually when she's faced with Jesus Christ, she thinks the big issue in the room is what I'm going to do for him, not what he's doing for me. And that, says the writer of Ecclesiastes, is a big mistake.

In the presence of the one who alone can satisfy, the one alone whose works last, do not assume that what you can do for him should be your first thought. Better not to offer to do anything because the likelihood is that you will offer something to do and forget to do it and look stupid.

You know, I surrender all is a bad vow unless you're singing it as a prayer which starts in your heart. God, please help me to do this. Now, if this is the one point this evening, God alone can satisfy our eternal longings, so seek him in silent confidence in his promises and not yours, then we can flesh that out just a little bit more, can't we?

Because unlike the preacher here, we have heard of the coming of the Son. We know of the cross and resurrection. So we may know that not making rash promises is because we need Christ's promise, the promise of forgiveness and grace for all who draw near.

[17 : 13] It's wrong, I think, isn't it, to think that the incarnation somehow makes God less awesome, as if the purpose of the incarnation is to tame God's awesomeness. God the eternal Son did not take on flesh so that you could wander into God's presence and shoot your mouth off.

The incarnation is not the domestication of God. Really, it's the accommodation of God so that in the silence of our awe, we can begin to see the details of his glorious self-giving grace.

So still be silent in his presence. The one who gave himself for you, who is King of kings and Lord of lords. Writing about a thousand years ago, the Benedictine monk, who then became the Archbishop of Canterbury.

I don't quite know how that career works out, but you can maybe explain it to me later. Anselm is his name. And he writes this in his prayers, which are titled the proselagoing, as he calls it.

And this is what he says. This is his sort of advice for us spiritually, in Anselm's advice. He says now, come now, insignificant man.

[18 : 24] In the, I've got this book by my bedside, and in my translation, it's come now, pathetic little man, which I quite like. Come now, pathetic little man, fly for a moment from your affairs.

Escape for a little while from the tumult of your thoughts. Put aside now your weighty cares, and leave your wearisome toils. Abandon yourself for a little to God, and rest for a little in him.

Enter into the inner chamber of your soul. Shut out everything save God, and what can be of help in your quest for him. And having locked the door, seek him out.

I seek your countenance, O Lord. Your countenance I seek. Here's a thought. This is where I'm going to finish this evening. What if the reason that we struggle so much with the meaninglessness and fragility of everything, what if the reason that we feel so perpetually dissatisfied when we come back from work in an afternoon or an evening, is that we have not carefully and regularly and reverently sought the Lord in silence, to sit in awe at who he is.

I think often as churches we can make the mistake of thinking that informality is the goal of the gathering. It's not, is it? All is the goal of the gathering.

[19 : 49] We want people to see and experience and feel the awesomeness of the God of glory who sent his son for them. It is not God Almighty, is it?

And so we sometimes are maybe a bit quick to sing of our devotion, when really we should perhaps just sit and contemplate of his greatness. Now what if it's contributing to our misery and our frustration that we just don't really spend enough time quietly contemplating the Lord?

My plan was to close by reading Psalm 145 for us. So if you will just graciously give me a few more minutes, we will read Psalm 145 slowly, and you can sit at the feet of the God of glory as we listen to his word.

We will keep our mouths shut, and we will listen to him in his words. Let me read it to you. Psalm of Praise of David.

I will exalt you, my God the King. I will praise your name forever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name forever and ever.

[21 : 12] Great is the Lord. And most worthy of praise. His greatness no one can fathom.

One generation commends your works to another. They tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty.

And I will meditate on your wonderful works. They tell of the power of your awesome works. And I will proclaim your great deeds.

They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The Lord is gracious and compassionate.

Slow to anger and rich in love. The Lord is good to all. He has compassion on all that he has made.

All your works praise you, Lord.

[22 : 10] Your faithful people extol you. They tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. And your dominion endures throughout all generations.

The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises.

And faithful in all he does. The Lord upholds all who fall. And lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you.

And you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. The Lord is righteous in all his ways.

And faithful in all he does. The Lord is near to all who call on him. To all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desires of those who fear him.

[23 : 15] He hears their cry and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love him. But all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak in praise of the Lord.

Let every creature praise his holy name. Forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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