

## VI. Ecclesiastes in Biblical Perspective

*From Vanity to Vitality*

“Vitality Over Vanity”

Ecclesiastes 5

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In this study we will be starting in Ecclesiastes 5. As one commentator said this book is not outlinable and I agree with them, although there are some outline insights that kind of show up in it. One was in Ecclesiastes 3 where we had an outbreak of vitality around fearing God because of His sovereignty. Now we have another outbreak in Ecclesiastes 5 of sanity, vitality and fear God because of His transcendence, but the rest of what we have covered looks at the vanity of striving after the wind under the sun because of the curse of sin and all of man's solutions to vanity actually add to vanity. In this study though we will get a little bit of uplifting in this chapter.

It's interesting to me how this defies logical connections, literary or theological, in which when does he move in describing vanity to vitality and his central theme of fear God. I believe it's because this is Solomon's book of repentance. I believe the book of Proverbs is when he called upon the Lord for wisdom and that's the product of it for the product of Proverbs is knowledge, understanding and wisdom where the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Then he went into the plunge of letting the world direct him by its framing principles and came back to repentance in the book of Ecclesiastes with the result being the third book he wrote, the Song of Solomon, which is the biblical look at love between the relationship of a man and a woman that becomes a framing statement of God's love for His bride, His covenant people. This ultimately brings us back to Proverbs, to fear God.

In this study we'll only look at the first seven verses of chapter 5 because beginning in verse 8 we will delve into another ransacking of everything under the sun to show its meaninglessness. This will carry on from Ecclesiastes 5:8 all the way to Ecclesiastes 7. In this study we'll get to look at a breath of vitality under, fear God and I'm going to give you the life takeaway first. Then I will break down the life takeaway into seven principles about worship from the text, by walking through the text.

The life takeaway is fear God and the primary expression that God has designed to express our awe, our reverence, our humility and our joy in who He is, is gathered worship. Gathered worship is the God given instrument whereby we express to Him a biblical fear of the Lord that God is God and we are liberated from thinking that we are God. Then worship and the act of worship calls you to, actually becomes a framing for a lifestyle that lives worship in the fear of God. In other words, when you prepare to worship, worship and have the blessings of worship it effects everything else in your life and how you frame, utilize and respond to life. That is exactly where He takes us here.

The seven principles about worship we'll see from the text require a certain life view that is God-centered, God-confident and functions with the fear of the Lord. I do not believe the fear of the Lord motivates the Christian life. I believe it's the love of the Lord that motivates the Christian life. The love of Christ compels us. [27] *And he (Jesus) answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself"* (Luke 10:27). While the love of the Lord is our

motivation, the fear of the Lord is our maturation. It matures us in the Christian life. I think you will see some of this in this text.

If I was doing a study solely on worship, Ecclesiastes 5 is not a text I would necessarily run to because it's not a comprehensive statement of worship nor a propositional theology of worship nor is it simply outlining worship. It is giving us principles about worship from those who fear the Lord by giving Him His honor, respect and majesty and these principles guide you out of worship as well into life. I would probably use texts like John 4, Psalm 100, Psalm 150 and other texts to do a study on worship but this is one of those jewels that is deeming with worship that has tentacles and implications in all arenas of life. It's not an exhaustive treatment of worship or a systematic treatment of worship but it affirms the primacy of worship, gives insights into worship and the expected outcomes of worship in our life. It is the worship of God out of the fear of God that produces a life for God that is lived under the eye of God and not under the sun. Let's look in the text.

Ecclesiastes 5:1–3 says *[1] Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. [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. Therefore let your words be few. [3] For a dream comes with much business, and a fool's voice with many words.*

Solomon is likely referring to the Solomonic temple when he says 'house of God' in verse 1. Now the house (temple) of God is no longer the physical structure where the church meets, for it's the church meeting. You are the temple of the Holy Spirit. When the local church gathers it is a temple of the Holy Spirit. About 175 years ago if you would have said to someone 'hey are you going to church?' it would have been thought as a verb and not a noun. In other words when we gather we're 'churching.' The church is gathering. The place that you 'church' was called the meeting house.

I am thankful for how easy technology makes it for us to listen to sermons and worship songs but that is not church and it's not even close to church. Perhaps it's a facsimile of a moment but it's not church. There is nothing that substitutes for the people of God gathering. Hebrews 10:24–25 says *[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.*

Ephesians 5:17–21 says *[17] Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. [18] And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, [19] **addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart**, [20] giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, [21] submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

In the Old Testament God's presence was in a place. We see Jesus addressing this issue with the woman at the well in John 4:19–24 which says *[19] The woman said to him, "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. [20] Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship." [21] Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. [22] You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. [23] But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the **true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.** [24] God*

*is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*” Jesus will dwell in the midst of His people when they assemble.

The Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem was a shadow of Christ and now Christ who is the Temple through the Holy Spirit where the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us as is says in John 1. In the New Testament the temple is the individual believer (I Corinthians 6:19) and the temple is the local church gathered as we are told in I Corinthians 3 and the church universal, the household of God that He is building. The temple is no longer stones piled up but living stones that are being put together not by human hands but by the Holy Spirit who has brought us together in and for Christ.

Now when you assemble for worship, go into the New Covenant house of God, you are to guard your steps. Prepare to worship. In our bulletin each week we use an instrument to guide us into worship for we don't come thoughtlessly into the presence of God. We come thoughtfully into the presence of God. The priority of worship is not only that I'm going to be there but I'm going to prepare to be there. There are a number of good books on the preparation of worship by A.W. Tozer and the puritans, knowing that the day begins with the evening and the morning, the Sabbath eve day to the Sabbath, to prepare for worship. We take every pain possible so that we are not rushed in but that we can compose ourselves as we come before the Lord in prayer, in the Word as we prepare our hearts for worship. Prepare your heart for the joy of your salvation and the reverence of God. This is how we guard our steps when we go to the house of God.

I have been asked why I emphasize so much the importance of being in worship during the days of difficulty and here is why. I know I have Jesus with me but I know I meet Jesus in a special way when His church gathers. He is really there when His church assembles and He has called me to be there with His people to meet Him. When I come to meet Him I want to be prepared. I have a command performance before my King to do the only thing in the Bible that He says He seeks from me and that is true worshippers who worship Him in spirit and truth. I love all that goes into my preparation for worship. The striking of the chimes three times at the beginning of our service is to declare the presence of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That sets my heart further from prayer, meditation and confession for I am now coming into the presence of God to give Him praise and a joy that is married to reverence in praise to God.

What tribe did Jesus come from? He came from the tribe of Judah. What does the word Judah mean? In Hebrew the word Judah means praise. When God ordered His people forward what tribe did He put first? It was the tribe of praise and they were to lead the people forward. I have never seen any leadership in the back and that's why I love to lead in worship and lead God's people in worship into the presence of the Lord. You are of the tribe of Judah. You are in Christ and Christ is in you. The greatest thing that God's people need is to be led forward out of the love of the Lord with the fear of the Lord in worship and praise.

The second principle of worship we see from the text is to be quick to listen. We also see this principle in Proverbs and James. James 1:19 says *[19] Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.* When I come into worship I'm not going to be speechless. God tells me in worship to confess, to praise, to speak to one another and to sing. I understand that what is in my heart will come out of my mouth and my lips are to be engaged but I want to be slow to speak, meaning I want to think in my mind and heart about what I'm saying. This is not a time for religious animal gutturals. I want to sing the truth, amen what is truth and when truth is sung or read I want to speak but I don't want to come in speaking first. I want to come in listening, lest the sacrifice of your lips is the sacrifice of foolishness.

Thirdly, bring a sacrifice of wisdom to worship. I'd like for you all to start a movement. Every time something is prayed, sung or preached that is the truth and you have listened carefully then amen it. I know for some this is the most frightening thing you will hear me ask of you. This is a way you get the opportunity to get in on the worship. You may even graduate one day to 'hallelujah' but start with 'amen.' Hebrews 13:15 says *[15] Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.* This is from knowledge, understanding and wisdom. One you know the facts. Two you have discernment with the facts and wisdom is now expressed from your heart through your lips as you affirm the truth of God's Word. So avoid the sacrifice of fools which is just drawing attention to yourself through a verbal regurgitation but don't be silent.

It does require silence to begin with because if you're talking you can't hear. A maxim my dad gave me in life was 'son, there is one time you know you're not learning anything and that's when you're talking.' So be quick to listen so that you're hearing knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Then don't be silent and bring the sacrifice of wisdom through your lips giving praise to God. By listening thoughtfully and carefully you won't bring the sacrifice of a fool for you want to enter into worship singing, confessing, praying, saying 'amen, hallelujah' because worship is verbal participation that is informed from discerning listening.

The fourth thing is to be slow to speak in worship but not silent. This brings me to number five.

Fifthly, worship is done from God's perspective. Life above the sun. Life from the heavens. It is not worship from man's perspective. According to Ecclesiastes 5:2 the words that we say and learn should reflect that God is in heaven and I am on earth. I was talking with a fellow who said to me 'My God...' and I stopped him and said 'my God? There is a commandment that says do not make any images that is don't create a god from your imagination.' The God you worship you worship from Divine revelation. You don't think up who God is for God reveals to you who He is and then we go to His Word that has come to us from the throne of God. In the Bible we don't have man's perspective from earth about God, for we have God's revelation from the heavens to us on the earth. That is why everything is won or lost.

Occasionally I will do a tweet on twitter to get a conversation going and a few days ago I made this point; theological liberalism is not a subset of Christianity, but it's the most insidious enemy of Christianity for multiple reasons. One of those reasons is theological liberalism undermines every foundational doctrine but still uses our vocabulary. It is confessional disingenuous. Here is the road mark of liberalism that is theological liberalism – cultural magisterium replacing biblical magisterium. What is meant by magisterium? Magisterial, magistrate, ruler – so instead of the Bible ruling what you believe the culture starts to rule what you believe and you twist the Scriptures to be framed by the cultures, instead of holding fast to the Scriptures to speak to the cultures.

By the way, you do that with love and not arrogance or self-righteousness. You do it with a tone that honors the truth that you're proclaiming. You do it with tactics that come from the truth that you proclaim. I know many people that hold to biblical truth but use worldly tactics in how they proclaim it. We want the tactic, the truth and the tone to come from the Bible and it is framing us so that we have God's perspective and His transcendence. That is how we get foolishness eradicated. Psalm 14:1a says *[1a] The fool says in his heart, "There is no God."* When you see life from the transcendence of God, a God-centered world and life view, then you can say 'yes' to the sacrifice of wisdom because wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. You

have the fear of the Lord when you listen to what God says in terms of who He is and why you exist.

Why do we exist? Why did God make you? He made you to worship Him. Why did God save you? He saved you to worship Him. Why did God sustain us so that we're breathing right now? So that all that hath breath might praise the Lord. That's what we understand when we view life from God's perspective. We don't make a god in our image as if we're god but we hear the God who has revealed Himself so that we can worship and praise that God as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

The sixth principle in worship is that God calls us to speak thoughtfully. He tells us to let our words be few but He doesn't say to be silent or absent. When He says for our words to be few it doesn't mean I have to number them, He wants them to be thoughtful. We want our words to be heard by our brothers and sisters and in heaven for what is in the heart will come out of the mouth. So thoughtfully speak.

Ecclesiastes 5:4–7 says *[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. [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? [7] For when dreams increase and words grow many, there is vanity; but God is the one you must fear.*

The last principle in worship are vows. We are to be thoughtful in worship as we engage in religious vows. In our church we have a number of vows – vows at baptism, membership, becoming an elder or deacon, in marriage. We need to think through those vows. Don't be foolish with your vows. He didn't say you don't vow, He said it's better not to vow than to vow and not pay. When Christians take vows they don't cross their fingers. They really mean what they say. These are not vows taken wrongly or false vows or taken and not fulfilled. We are looking to the Lord for our vows. Vitality comes from a right view of God and the fear of the Lord expressed in worship.

I'm sure this probably brings up a lot of questions in your mind. I will take this last part to answer some of what I think your questions might be. Does it mean we shouldn't take vows? Jesus is clear for people to trust us our life should be enough. Let's look at Matthew 5 for this. Matthew 5:33–37 says *[33] "Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' [34] But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, [35] or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. [36] And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. [37] Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes from evil.*

In other words, you are not to lift up yourself by the taking of oaths. You do not take oaths except for those oaths that God has ordained that you take in His Name. Every place I have taken a valid biblical oath before God with His Name that becomes a priority. I took an oath before the Lord for my marriage, for my children at baptism, for my church membership vows, and for my ordination as a pastor. These vows belong in the context of worship to the Lord and that becomes a priority.

There are some oaths that you take outside of worship. We treat those sacredly as well before the Lord. We don't take them unless we're going to vow them. It may be an employment oath, a witness oath at a court case, a contract vow, etc. You want to live your life in such a way that you do not require that oath for you to be faithful. That is where they were – I don't have to

do it if I didn't take a vow. Their integrity was measured by vows instead of their integrity being measured by their relationship with the Lord. There is a place for vows, not because you need it but because your neighbor may need it.

If I'm on trial I would certainly want the witness to have to take an oath. I want to know that they mean business when they are up there and not up there with their fingers crossed. They may disregard their oath. When we take any oath we don't do it for ourselves but for the confidence and serenity of those who we have entered into the vow with. You will find that the more your life speaks for your integrity out of your relationship with the Lord the less people will ask you to sign something. In fact there was a time we really honored this notion so that a hand shake was enough.

The last time we bought a house which was over 20 years ago I never signed so many papers in all my life. I don't know how many papers I actually signed but actually the more you have to sign the less meaningful it is, isn't it? Christians should not be in this category and there is a place for oaths and vows outside of worship. Then there's a place for oaths and vows within worship which are those that God has called, designed and called for in His Word. When we take these vows we need to think through them and mean what we say.

This is why I teach a pastor's class. I don't do this to find out if people are good enough to join our church. I want them to know what our church is and if you join you will take five vows and I want them to know what they mean and they need to mean those vows. You are taking a holy vow in the name of God and they are called for from God's Word and need to be entered in appropriately. But don't take rash vows or vows of false intentions to show off in worship. That is what the writer of Ecclesiastes is saying here in chapter 5.

Jacob did it. You will find this in Genesis 35 where in Bethel Jacob said 'God if You do this I'll vow to do that.' This is the arrogance of initiating a vow before God instead of receiving the vows that God calls us to make that He gives us. Do you know one of the most rash (can't believe it) vows that troubles so many of you in the Bible? Have you heard of Jephthah? He made a rash vow. Let's look at it in Judges 11. Here is a great example of what the writer of Ecclesiastes is giving in sanity and vitality when we revere God in worship with vows before God. Jephthah had been called. He was the son of Gilead who was married to a prostitute so Jephthah was not well thought of but when they needed him they called on him.

Judges 11:29–40 says [29] *Then the Spirit of the LORD was upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh and passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. [30] And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, [31] then whatever comes out from the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites shall be the LORD's, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering."* [32] *So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them, and the LORD gave them into his hand. [33] And he struck them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty cities, and as far as Abel-keramim, with a great blow. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.*

[34] *Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah. And behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances. She was his only child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter. [35] And as soon as he saw her, he tore his clothes and said, "Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow."* [36] *And she said to him, "My father, you have opened your mouth to the LORD; do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has avenged you on your enemies, on the Ammonites."*

*[37] So she said to her father, "Let this thing be done for me: leave me alone two months, that I may go up and down on the mountains and weep for my virginity, I and my companions."*

*[38] So he said, "Go." Then he sent her away for two months, and she departed, she and her companions, and wept for her virginity on the mountains. [39] And at the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow that he had made. She had never known a man, and it became a custom in Israel [40] that the daughters of Israel went year by year to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in the year.*

He tells his daughter that his problem is she came out the door but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that he made a rash vow, but his daughter, rejoicing in the victory that God had given him, told him that if God gave him the victory then he needed to do what he vowed and then do what he vowed to her. She only asked for some time to weep over the fact that she was in her virginity, meaning she had never married, and now she will never have children.

The question becomes did Jephthah fulfill his vow and offer his daughter as a burnt offering or did Jephthah modify his vow where instead of offering her as a burnt offering, offered her to the Lord in her virginity in that she would never marry and be a celibate the rest of her life which would cost her a marriage, children and cost Jephthah his line for his line would no longer continue through his daughter? I don't know what he did but my tendency is to think he offered her as a burnt offering and the virginity was the fact that she would never be married. Could he have altered the vow to be her virginity? I don't know but I do know that before God he didn't have to fulfill that vow because God in the book of Leviticus said that if you ever make a vow that calls for sin against Me, the sin against Me trumps the vow. God made an avenue to escape a rash vow, if you made a vow that would lead to sin. Human sacrifice is a sin according to the law of God. I will show you this in Leviticus 5 where Jephthah had a way out.

Everything is important in your Bible. God made a provision for a moment like this. Leviticus 5:4–6 says *[4] or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these; [5] when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, [6] he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.*

So here God had made a way out for a rash oath once it became obvious that it was leading to sin and that would be Jephthah's vow. That law had been given long before Jephthah. If you go back and read Jephthah speaking about Israel in Judges 11 I can't help but know that he would have known that so my opinion is that he was going to do the burnt offering and knows of this provision but he and his daughter out of this issue of integrity that they both bring to it, while he wouldn't have to bring her as a burnt offering, they went ahead as she made a commitment to celibacy for life just out of her own heart to do that. I'm just trying to teach you a little bit about oaths and vows.

Oaths and vows are not sinful but you can sinfully take oaths and vows. A right place of taking oaths and vows needs to be protected and taught and it's in the context of worship. We don't take false oaths that we don't fulfill or rash oaths that we need to seek forgiveness for. On the contrary we take only those oaths that God has prescribed in His Word and that God would give us the strength. So the fear of the Lord is taught in worship. The fear of the Lord matures our worship and matures our life in worship. It teaches us how to prepare and listen for worship. The fear of the Lord teaches us when and how to speak. It teaches us to have a God-centered,

transcendent world and life view that is defined by the Word of God that we believe God's Word and we want to do what God's Word says. We want to do that in worship and then take it into all of life. That's vitality – the fear of the Lord in worship. This Lord has given you many reasons to worship Him for He has given His Son to remove the curse of sin and to take you from vanity to vitality. This God loves you and is in you. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. We want to praise You in worship – praise God from whom all blessings flow. We want our worship to reflect and instruct our heart. We want our life to be worship before You, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

THE OVERVIEW

I. Again I saw (v.1–3)

II. Then I saw (v.4–6)

III. Again I saw (v.7–12)

A Final Observation (v.13–16)