

ECCLESIASTES 4:13-5:7 WHY LISTEN? - The Wise Person Heeds The Warnings Gained From Past Mistakes And Godly Counselors?

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One of the difficulties of parenting is trying to warn children not to make poor decisions. Parents are able to give these warnings because they learned the hard way through the many mistakes they made along the way—many mistakes that could have been avoided if they had listened to their own parents. Much pain and many heartaches can be avoided when one has a teachable spirit. In Ecclesiastes 4:13–5:7, the Teacher instructs the reader that it is wise to heed the warnings of past mistakes and the wise advice of godly counselors.

What lessons from history do people rely on when living today? Why might a person ignore history and the lessons to be learned?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ECCLESIASTES 4:13–5:7

The Teacher wrote this book as a record of his search for meaning in life. He began with a record of his own personal failed attempts to discover the meaning of life. His conclusions were the verdicts of one who had personally investigated every angle before declaring his judgments on the matter. He pursued several paths, nevertheless each of them were dead ends.

In his search for meaning in life, Solomon discovered life only makes sense when one acknowledges God. Otherwise, it is all nonsense. For example, while it is impossible for fallen humans living in a fallen world to understand the various seasons of life and all the activities that accompany these seasons, people should recognize that God in His sovereignty has appointed all of them and that they are appropriate to His purpose. What is God's purpose? It is to teach people that He should be at the center of their lives. The ability to be active and enjoy the fruits of one's endeavors is a gift from God. Therefore, one should enjoy God's blessings and do good (3:1-15).

Additionally, human beings need to live life with an appropriate understanding of the present fallen world in which they live. Living in a fallen world means living in a world where sin thrives. In its present state, it is chaotic and will never satisfy one's deepest longings. Living in a fallen world means living in a dying world. Therefore, people should live with a proper perspective of their own mortality (3:16–4:6). Finally, Solomon surmised what God said in the beginning: "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). A life lived in fellowship with others is better than a life lived in isolation (4:7-12).

As you read Ecclesiastes 4:13–5:7, identify words and phrases that emphasize listening. What are the dangers of failing to listen?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WHEN LEADING (ECCL. 4:13-16)

V. 13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. V. 14 The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. V. 15 I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. V. 16 There was no end to all the people who were before them. But those who came later were not pleased with the successor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

VERSE 13

The Teacher recognized that having a teachable spirit was necessary for living a meaningful and successful life, and this means receiving instruction in community with those who are experienced and wise. Valuing and receiving instruction from wise counselors is central to the Bible's concept of wise living. (See **Prov. 4:13; 19:20.**) In contrast, fools arrogantly despise instruction and wisdom. (See **Prov. 1:7; 5:12-13; 15:5.**)

In ancient Israel, the general consensus was that young people were foolish and old people wise. What's more, kings were supposed to be guided by wisdom (**Prov. 8:15**). Here, Solomon used irony to teach the wisdom of being teachable by stating that **a poor but wise youth** is better than an experienced **king** who has sat on the throne many years but is no longer willing to listen to wise counsel. In contrast to the much older king, this young male, possibly a teenager, was teachable and willing to pay attention to the insightful advice of others. The older king's refusal to listen to wise counsel was **foolish** and shameful.

VERSES 14-16

The young man was the most unlikely person to become a king or be recognized as wise, he **may have come from prison**. As a prisoner, he would have been deprived of the ability to make any decisions for himself. He would have been at the mercy of others and either disdained or forgotten by society. Slaves in the ancient Near East lived in better conditions than did prisoners. Also, describing him as **born in poverty** means he came from humble beginnings. Nevertheless, Solomon's bottom line was that wisdom does not depend on one's birth, social class, wealth, or age. This teaching is both a warning and an encouragement at the same time. The best of conditions for learning wisdom do not guarantee it, and the worst of conditions cannot in and of themselves keep one from attaining it and the opportunities it affords, such as becoming king in the case of this young man. Solomon's story is reminiscent of Joseph, who was released from prison in order to rule over Egypt as Pharaoh's second in command.

What are the characteristics of teachable people, and how does one develop a teachable spirit?

The Teacher witnessed a second **youth** who succeeded the first young man who had replaced the old foolish king. The people who once adored the first young man who became king now followed his successor. As wise as the young man who replaced the old but foolish king was, his reign came to an end just as the foolish king's reign did before him. So regardless of whether one is foolish or wise, one's time on this earth is short-lived.

The third king's popularity appears to have surpassed that of his two predecessors. Regardless, his idolization and influence were also fleeting. No matter how great a king he was and how much the people loved him, those of the next generation would fail to appreciate all that he had accomplished and would soon forget him. This too is similar to what happened to Joseph, even though he saved the lives of multitudes of peoples. After he died, the next king who came to power "did not know about Joseph" and initiated a program of heavy oppression on Joseph's people (**Ex. 1:8**). The Teacher knew that the whims of the masses change directions as quickly as **the wind**, and the human aspiration for eternal glory is as **meaningless** as a **chasing after the wind**. Jesus' question was indicative of the Teacher's observation when He asked, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (**Mark 8:36**).

How is the cycle described by Solomon in this passage seen today?

BIBLE SKILL: Use a Bible dictionary to gain insight.

Read articles about vows in a Bible dictionary. Review Bible passages identified, looking for common themes. How are the themes connected to each other? How are these common themes you identified seen in Ecclesiastes 4:13–5:7?

WHEN WORSHIPING (ECCL. 5:1-3)

V. 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. V. 2 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. V. 3 A dream comes when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool.

VERSE 1

Verse 1 contains the first of two admonitions concerning worship. The word guard is a warning that means "to be cautious" or "to be careful to do something." It is the same word Moses used when he exhorted the Israelites to "keep the law" and "keep the Sabbath" (**Deut. 4:40; 5:12**). Here, **guard your steps** means to think carefully before taking action **when you go to the house of God** to worship.

Instead of approaching worship nonchalantly, one must approach worship reverently and circumspectly, recognizing there are consequences to how one worships God. The worship God accepts is that which comes from a heart devoted to obeying Him. In contrast, **fools** think that as long as they make some religious gesture toward God, then their worship is acceptable to Him. They are ignorant of what it means to worship God because they believe expressions of worship are distinct from a life of obedience. However, the Scriptures are very clear that God will not accept the worship of the disobedient. (See **Ps. 66:18**.) Moreover, the prophet Samuel said obeying the Lord is more important than offering sacrifices to Him (**1 Sam. 15:22**). Our expressions of worship are an offense to God if they do not come from

hearts submitted to Him. The fool does not know how dangerous it is to enter into worship with such disregard for God.

VERSES 2-3

The second admonition regarding worship is that people should be careful to abstain from saying something they really do not mean or that they would not say if they gave it more thought. This can happen when people sing songs with lyrics they do not mean or pray prayers that are just empty words or clichés. It means recognizing there is nothing one can say that will impress God or inform Him of something He does not already know. It means abstaining from making empty promises to God.

As the saying goes, “Think before you speak.” Why? Because just as those with a lot on their minds have trouble resting, so those who talk excessively cannot do so without sinning and getting themselves into trouble. Solomon’s instruction is similar to Jesus’ words to His disciples before He taught them the model prayer: “And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (**Matt. 6:7-8**). It does not mean we should not pray. It just means we should be more focused on God and more mindful of who He is when we pray.

Why are worshipers prone to approach God with meaningless rituals instead of hearts for obedience?

WHEN PROMISING (ECL. 5:4-7)

V. 4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. V. 5 It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it. 6 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? V. 7 Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.

VERSES 4-7

Verses 4-6 have as their background Moses’ teaching in **Deuteronomy 23:21-23** concerning making a **vow to God**. A vow involved an oath to God promising to offer something to Him if He would act on behalf of the individual making the vow. Sometimes people make vows in the midst of great danger or need, but sometimes it is out of great desire. For instance, Hannah was unable to have children. So she went to the tabernacle and vowed to God that if He gave her a son, she would “give him to the Lord for all the days of his life.” In grateful response to the Lord’s granting her request, her husband offered a vow offering on their behalf in gratitude for what God had done (**1 Sam. 1:9-28**).

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God never required anyone to make a vow to Him. Therefore, failing to keep a voluntary vow to the Lord in His house was a serious offense and equated to breaking the third commandment, which forbids the misuse of the Lord’s name (**Ex. 20:7; see also Lev. 19:12**). God’s final words in Leviticus warn of the costliness of breaking a vow (**Lev. 27**). The voluntary act of making a vow to God was the highest worship one could offer God. Voluntary expressions of worship are more a blessing to God than doing only what is required. For this reason, it is foolish to take what is a delight to the Lord and turn it into

self-centered grandstanding before Him, acting as if one delights in God when in truth that person just seeks to advance himself or herself with grand promises.

What does the expectation of keeping a vow made to God reveal about the true nature of worship? How does this expectation relate to the character of God?

God expects His people to keep their commitments. People often look for ways to back out of their commitments to God and others. It dishonors God when we refuse or fail to keep our word. Therefore, it would be better never to make a vow than to make one **and not fulfill it**.

The Teacher's admonition is "Do not sin with your mouth or complain about your commitments to God to His minister" (**messenger** probably refers to a temple servant). Failure to keep one's promises to God robs God of the honor and worship He deserves and robs the individual of the blessings and honor that come from God to those who keep their vows. Lying to God has serious consequences, and just in case one thinks this is only an Old Testament teaching, one should recall Ananias and Sapphira who lost their lives because they lied to the Holy Spirit (**Acts 5:1-11**). We must be like the psalmist in **Psalm 66:13-15** who determined to keep his vows to the Lord.

Dreaming of what one might do for God and expressing elaborate plans to serve Him mean nothing to Him apart from faithful obedience. What matters to God and should therefore matter to every individual is that we live our lives in complete devotion to Him. This is what it means to **fear God**.

Why is it better to refrain from making a vow to God than making a vow and not keeping it?

KEY DOCTRINE: Scripture

Scripture reveals the principles by which God judges us (Rom. 2:1-5).

APPLY THE TEXT

Christian leaders must willingly listen to wise counsel when leading.

Believers are to worship God in reverent obedience.

Wise believers carefully weigh the promises they make to God and others, knowing God will expect them to keep any promises made.

Discuss as a group ways of encouraging each other to listen to wise counsel. What role does your Bible study group and church play in helping others find and listen to wise counsel?

List reasons why believers in times of corporate worship should prioritize listening to God and how they may do so. How can you give greater priority to listening to God through worship?

What promises to God have you made that you have yet to fulfill? What keeps you from fulfilling that promise? What steps do you need to take to move closer to fulfilling your promise?

ADDITIONAL VERSES

Proverbs 4:13 Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life.

Proverbs 19:20 Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Proverbs 5:12-13 And say, How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; 13 And have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me!

Proverbs 15:5 A fool despiseth his father's instruction: but he that regardeth reproof is prudent.

Proverbs 8:15 By me kings reign, and princes decree justice.

Exodus 1:8 Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph.

Mark 8:36 For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

Deuteronomy 4:40 Thou shalt keep therefore his statutes, and his commandments, which I command thee this day, that it may go well with thee, and with thy children after thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days upon the earth, which the Lord thy God giveth thee, for ever.

Deuteronomy 5:12 Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee.

Psalms 66:18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:

1 Samuel 15:22 And Samuel said, Hath 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 hearken than the fat of rams.

Matthew 6:7-8 But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. 8 Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him.

Deuteronomy 23:21-23 When thou shalt vow a vow unto the Lord thy God, thou shalt not slack to pay it: for the Lord thy God will surely require it of thee; and it would be sin in thee. 22 But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee. 23 That which is gone out of thy lips thou shalt keep and perform; even a freewill offering, according as thou hast vowed unto the Lord thy God, which thou hast promised with thy mouth.

1 Samuel 1:9-28 So Hannah rose up after they had eaten in Shiloh, and after they had drunk. Now Eli the priest sat upon a seat by a post of the temple of the Lord. 10 And she was in bitterness of soul, and prayed unto the Lord, and wept sore. 11 And she vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head. 12 And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli marked her mouth. 13 Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had been drunken. 14 And Eli said unto her, How long wilt thou be drunken? put away thy wine from thee. 15 And Hannah answered and said, No, my lord, I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but have poured out my soul before the Lord. 16 Count not thine handmaid for a daughter of Belial: for out of the abundance of my complaint and grief have I spoken hitherto. 17 Then Eli answered and said, Go in peace: and the God of Israel grant thee thy petition that thou hast asked of him. 18 And she said, Let thine handmaid find grace in thy sight. So the woman went her way, and did eat, and her countenance was no more sad. 19 And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the Lord, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the Lord remembered her. 20 Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the Lord. 21 And the man Elkanah, and all his house, went up to offer unto the Lord the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. 22 But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the Lord, and there abide for ever. 23 And Elkanah her husband said unto her, Do what seemeth thee good; tarry until thou have weaned him; only the Lord establish his word. So the woman abode, and gave her son suck until she weaned him. 24 And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bullocks, and one ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine, and brought him unto the house of the Lord in Shiloh: and the child was young. 25 And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli. 26 And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the Lord. 27 For this child I prayed; and the Lord hath given me my petition which I asked of him: 28 Therefore also I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord. And he worshipped the Lord there.

Exodus 20:7 Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Leviticus 19:12 And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord.

Acts 5:1-11 But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, 2 And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? 4 Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. 5 And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. 6 And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. 7 And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. 8 And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. 9 Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt

the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. 10 Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband. 11 And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.

Psalm 66:13-15 I will go into thy house with burnt offerings: I will pay thee my vows, 14 Which my lips have uttered, and my mouth hath spoken, when I was in trouble. 15 I will offer unto thee burnt sacrifices of fatlings, with the incense of rams; I will offer bullocks with goats. Selah.

Romans 2:1-5 Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. 2 But we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth against them which commit such things. 3 And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? 4 Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? 5 But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God;