



10^{session 10} LISTEN UP



EXPLORE scripture ECCLESIASTES 4:13-5:7

ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16

13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. **14** The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. **15** I saw that all who

lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor. **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.

ECCLESIASTES 5:1-3

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

ECCLESIASTES 5:4-7

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. **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? **7** Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.



EXPLORE options

1. Warning Signs

Prior to your group meeting, save various pictures of warning signs on your phone, tablet, or computer. Try to include both pictures your students will be able to identify easily and others that they may not have seen before. Examples could include signs for railroad crossings, work zones, dead ends, etc. You might even consider including some signs in a language other than English. As you show each sign, let students tell you what the sign is designed to warn against. Point out that the purpose of each of these signs is to keep us safe from some potential danger. Today we are going to see that God has placed two important tools in our lives to keep us safe and to keep us on track in our relationship with Him. Those two tools are His Word and other believers. Following God means humbling ourselves before Him and listening to counsel.

2. Telephone

Play the game “Telephone” using our Central Truth as the message. Have your group divide into teams of 8–10 students each. If you don’t have enough students to do teams of 8–10, fewer students per team is okay, but even if you have to just have one team, it is better to play with larger groups of students. If you have never played Telephone, the rules are simple. Line students up and whisper a message (in this case, today’s Central Truth) to the student at the front of the line. That student will try to remember the message and whisper it to the next student in line, and so on. Repeat until the last student in line receives the message. After each team has finished, ask the last student in each line to share what the message was. See how close the message was to the original message. Today we are going to discuss the spiritual value of listening both to God and to the godly people He has placed in our lives. Following God means humbling ourselves before Him and listening to counsel.



LET'S talk

When you are trying to decide which movie or show to watch or which game to play, what is your process for deciding?

Do you prefer to get advice from others or do you prefer to decide on your own?



THIS WEEK'S focus

It may be hard to believe, but there was a day when the best way to decide on a movie to watch was to call your friends and ask for their opinion. Now with smart phones, we don't need to ask for advice from friends—we can get movie reviews immediately and can even find aggregated review scores on sites like Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic. Despite this, some of us still really like to hear directly from our friends who know us best and understand our tastes in shows or films. Today we are going to talk about the value of counsel in areas of our lives far more important than which movies we watch. Following God means humbling ourselves before Him and listening to counsel.



CONVERSATION questions

READ ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16.

13 Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to heed a warning. **14** The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. **15** I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed

the youth, the king's successor. **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.

.01 What contrast does the Teacher make in these verses? What is the point?

.02 How can we avoid becoming like the foolish king? How can we avoid becoming people who don't know how to heed warnings?

The contrast the Teacher paints is between that of a king who has a lot of influence and power but is detached from the reality in which his people live, and a poor person who has no power but is very aware of what life is like in the kingdom. Solomon essentially says that it is better to have no power and be aware of reality and engaged in the community you live in than it is to have lots of power but be detached from the people around you. We can tell a lot about people in power from how they respond to criticism and warnings. Wise people are willing to listen to others and fight the temptation to silence their critics. Challenge your students to consider how they respond to people who express concerns about their choices or actions. These verses challenge us to consider: Do we tend to brush off critics? Do we ignore them or even maybe try to shame them? These are examples of foolishness. The more power and influence we have, the harder it can be to listen to the concerns and advice of others. This is even more true in today's world, where social media gives us all the illusion of greater influence and power than we actually have. If we are not careful, this illusion can encourage us to think more highly of ourselves than we should, leading to damaged relationships and an unwillingness to hear from and learn from others.



LEADER PACK

ITEM 7 | The teacher says that a power hungry approach to leadership and politics is meaningless (v. 16). For more examples of things that are "meaningless" and what the Teacher means by that,

Need more commentary? Use discount code EXPLORESUMMER2021 at logos.com/explorethebible to download more Bible commentary on Ecclesiastes for free.

SCRIPTURE commentary

see the “**There is a Time to . . .**” poster.



CULTURE | How do these verses relate to politics?

By means of an example story, the Teacher claims that it is better to be politically weak, but aware and active, than to be powerful but inflexible and blind to reality. The political world is unstable and therefore dangerous; the wise stay aware of these changes. Even so, the fulfillment of political ambitions is temporary; and the motivation behind political ambition, fame, and the praise of people is short-lived. The wise youth is “better” than an old but foolish king—he knows how to “take warning.” He is aware of both danger and opportunity as he moves up the political ladder. The king, however, is entrenched, immobile, and out of touch with changing circumstances. This passage does not tell us which way to go politically but does tell us that being unwilling to hear from and learn from others is a sure path

KEY QUESTION in politics and all areas of life.

.03 Why is humility an important part of following Jesus? How does humility help us grow (see Phil. 2:1-11)?

Humility does not mean having a low view of yourself—instead, it is about refusing to elevate yourself above others. Jesus is the perfect example of true humility: He was equal with God in every way and yet chose to live among us and take upon Himself all the limitations that come with being human (see Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus did this out of love for God and love for us. In other words, as followers of Jesus we should not constantly think about how we can get ahead or take advantage of others. Instead, followers of Jesus should constantly ask, “How can I bless, encourage, and empower others? How can I use whatever influence or power I have to help others?”

ECCLESIASTES 4:13-16

4:13-16. This section illustrates how fleeting political power is. There are two people here. The first person is an old king, who in his youth was poor but rose to power through skill and perseverance. This king is now old but foolish. The second person is a youth who possesses the political skills the old king once had but lost.

4:13. The youth is “better” in that he knows how to “take warning.” He is aware of both danger and opportunity as he moves up the political ladder. The king has been in power for so long that he has lost touch with changing political circumstances. The irony here is that contrary to traditional thinking, neither age nor might insures wisdom and success.

4:14. Once young and powerless, the king nevertheless was astute and able to seize opportunity. Now, however, he is cut off from political reality.

4:15. Eventually a second youth moves in to take the old king’s throne. This youth is none other than the one mentioned in verse 13; he is chronologically second since the now-aged king who rose from obscurity to power (v. 14) is the implied first youth. The latter youth uses his energy and political cunning to gain the hearts of a people who are weary of the now-alooof, inflexible, and aged monarch.

4:16. Nevertheless, the new king is no more significant than the old one. The two together are only points in history. Just as those who lived before them knew nothing of them, so those who come after will soon forget them.



CONVERSATION questions

READ ECCLESIASTES 5:1-3.

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

.04 What do these verses warn against? What do they encourage?

KEY QUESTION

.05 Where is God and where are we (v. 2)? Why might we need this reminder?

To guard your steps means to proceed with reverence. The Teacher is challenging us to remember who we are speaking to when we approach God in prayer or worship. This passage reminds us of Moses's encounter with God at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5). Before hearing from God and embracing the mission God had for him, Moses needed to understand something about God—that He is holy. God is set apart, perfect in knowledge, love, and power. And yet, human beings have a long track record of failing to recognize God's holiness. From the very beginning of human history, people have been exalting themselves. This is what Adam and Eve did when they listened to the serpent and ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—they bought into the idea that if they ate of this tree, they could be the ones who get to decide what is right and wrong. We need to remember God's position and ours. He is in heaven, the realm of God, and we are on earth. In other words, God is wiser, stronger, and more loving than we are.

We all face the temptation of thinking of our relationship with God primarily in terms of what we can get out of it. To be "quick with your mouth" (v. 2) carries the idea of thinking you can bargain with God. Again, we need to remember our position versus God's. The eternal, holy God of the universe has no needs—there is nothing we can bring Him that would make Him owe us a better or more fulfilled life. He is worthy of all that we are and all that we have. We must not treat God like a tool to get ahead. We should seek God and live in obedience to Him because He is worthy.

ECCLESIASTES 5:1-3

5:1. Reference to *sacrifice* shows that the *house of God* is the temple, not the synagogue. Those who draw near simply to listen (i.e., in reverence) do not give themselves any occasion for getting into trouble (as in vv. 2-6). It is in this sense that they do not know how to do wrong.

5:2. For the Teacher the supreme act of impiety is the presumption that one can be in a position of control when dealing with God. He does not reject or even criticize prayer, but he does contend that we have nothing to offer God and thus are in no position to bargain with or impress Him.

5:3. Verse 3, which is apparently a common proverb, is difficult; the meaning of the parallel proverb in verse 7a is also debated. Nevertheless, the word “dreams” refers not to literal dreams. Instead, the word is used metaphorically, as in the English, “He has big dreams.” Those who have many troubles may fantasize of performing great and noble acts, but their aspirations are meaningless.

.06 What keeps us from being willing to hear and submit to God and the teaching of His Word?

According to the Teacher, it is our tendency to speak that most often gets in the way of our being willing to listen. In other words, it is our tendency to think a bit too highly of ourselves—our own understanding and solutions—that keeps us from humbly submitting to God. Challenge your students to consider what it might look like for them to make a practice of approaching God humbly. How might we remind ourselves that God knows better than we do—that He is wiser, better, and kinder than we are? When you read God’s Word or hear it preached, do you expect to hear from God? Spiritual growth requires acknowledging that every time we come to God we come with needs and weaknesses to the One who has none. Thankfully, our great and holy God also loves us, and delights in meeting our needs and shaping our hearts and lives.

So let’s go to God humbly, ready to not only hear what He has to say, but to respond to it with repentance and faith. When we read God’s Word, we should do so with a sense of expectancy—trusting that God wants to speak to us and reshape our thoughts, actions, and priorities for His kingdom purposes.



LEADER PACK

ITEM 9 | Remind students of the truth of **Job 42:5-6**: we serve a God who is wiser, stronger, and better than we are. This truth should move us to repent.



CONVERSATION questions

READ ECCLESIASTES 5:4-7.

4 When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. **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? **7** Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore fear God.

07 What do we communicate about ourselves when we make promises that we fail to keep?

KEY QUESTION

08 What is the point of verse 7? Instead of making big vows, what does it look like to fear God?

We have a tendency to over-complicate things, and this passage really simplifies what it looks like to trust and live for God. There is no special formula or intricate strategy to following God. This seems to be what Solomon means by his statement about dreams in verse 7. All our plotting and planning is vapor; our plans are temporary and human in their approach. The impressive commitments and prayers we might make to God don't actually impress Him, particularly when we fail to keep our commitments. When we make big commitments and fail to follow through on keeping them, it communicates what we value—and what we don't. For example, when we commit to reading the Bible early every morning and soon start hitting the snooze button, it's as if we are saying what we really value is our own comfort. If we lived with a greater awareness of God's infinite greatness, we would be a lot more careful about making commitments to Him.

So how should we approach God? The Teacher says we should fear Him (not be terrified of him, but honor and respect Him above all things). We need to remember who God is and who we are. We need to remember God's position and our position; His sufficiency and our need. God is in heaven and we are on earth. Knowing our limitations, we should stop trying to prove our worth to God through good and religious deeds. We cannot impress Him; instead we should simply submit to Him. This text calls on us to depend on God's grace rather

than our religious deeds. Fearing God also means being willing to learn from the counsel and advice of godly people. Challenge your students to consider what they might gain from the people He has placed in their lives.



CONTEXT | What kind of dreaming does the Teacher have in mind in verse 7?

“Dreaming” in verse 7 doesn’t refer to literal dreams, whether as revelations or the nightmares of those who are full of anxiety. Instead, the word is used metaphorically, as in the sentence, “He has big dreams.” Those who have many troubles may fantasize of performing great and noble acts, but without action, these fantasies are meaningless. Similarly, many words (which proceed from the speaker’s presumption that he is wise) mark a person as a fool. A modern take on verse 7 would be, “Many of our biggest dreams in life are temporary—they are not eternal.” In context these proverbs mean that fools seek to advance themselves before God with great vows and promises. In contrast, the Teacher encourages us to simply fear God. Those who truly trust God don’t have to prove their faith with big words and promises because trusting God is simply part of their day-to-day lifestyle. They make a practice of humbly submitting to God’s direction and teaching.

ECCLESIASTES 5:4-7

5:4. God delights in those people who keep their word because He is the original “promise keeper” (Num. 23:19; 2 Cor. 1:20). The importance of the spoken and kept word is not something He takes lightly. Those who are devastated by the severity of this verse will want to remember that “promise breakers” like Peter can be restored (Matt. 16:21-23; 26:33-35; compare with John 21:3-17)!

5:5. This verse is quite clear and is further illustrated by both positive and negative examples in the Bible—Jephthah’s presumptuous vow about his daughter (Judg. 11:30-31), Ananias and Sapphira’s pride-filled vow (Acts 5:1-4), and Jonah’s desperate vow (Jonah 2:9). Another example is one of the most God-glorifying vows recorded in Scripture—the one Hannah made about her son Samuel (1 Sam. 1:11).

5:6. Our speech is powerful (Jas. 3:5-6) and can cause great evil (Prov. 10:19; 12:18). Much destruction comes from not heeding this clear and powerful teaching.

5:7. Because we are weak, small, and prone to fail, we should give up on trying to impress God with vows, gifts, and promises. We cannot impress Him; our place is to be humble and obedient. This text calls on us to depend on the grace of God and not on our religious deeds. The person who fears God (a common theme in Ecclesiastes) is on solid ground (1 John 2:17; Ps. 34:9).



NOW What?

CENTRAL truth

Following God means humbling ourselves before Him and listening to counsel.

.09 How can we fight the temptation to think that we know better than everyone else?

.10 What does it mean to humble yourself? What does it not mean?

KEY QUESTION

.11 What keeps us from coming to God humbly? What is one step you could take this week to humble yourself before God?

.12 Who has God placed in your life to give you wise advice? What can you learn from these people?



THE STUDENT LEADER PACK is available for purchase on lifeway.com/explorethebiblestudents. It includes valuable posters that are referenced throughout the *Leader Guide*, Family Connection guides that equip families to discuss the Bible on-the-go, a Midweek study of a complimentary book of the Bible, a link to training audio to help leaders prepare for each session, and PowerPoint templates with graphics from the quarter study to help prepare slides for teaching.



DAILY devotions

The Bible is no ordinary book—it is God’s powerful Word and it is given to us for our good (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 4:13). So we should read the Bible more carefully and thoughtfully than any other book. This is where the 7 Arrows of Bible Reading come in—these 7 questions will train you and your students to get more out of your time in the Bible and experience its life-transforming power. Your students’ *Daily Discipleship Guide* (item 005646504) contains five days of Daily Devotions built on the 7 Arrows. Here is a summary of the texts they will be studying. We encourage you to follow along and use the 7 Arrows questions to guide your own study of God’s Word.

7 ARROWS FOR BIBLE reading



What does this passage say?



What does this passage tell us about God?



What did this passage mean to its original audience?



How does this passage change the way I relate to people?



What does this passage tell us about man?



How does this passage prompt me to pray?



What does this passage demand of me?

LEADER challenge

MEMORIZE

Ecclesiastes 5:1

CONNECT

Send a group email or group message to your students, encouraging them to complete their daily devotions. You might also consider sharing your own insights from the daily readings as a means of encouraging them.

DAY 1 ECCL. 4:13-16

DAY 2 ECCL. 5:1-2

DAY 3 ECCL. 5:3-7

DAY 4 ACTS 5:1-4

DAY 5 MATTHEW 5:33-37