

5:1-9 – THE QUESTION OF THEODICY, PT. 3

God's people have an idea of how the world should be. After all, we have the Bible to inform us how God himself says the world should be. However, the world we live in is often antithetical to God's word. This can be unsettling to our souls and even cause us to question if God sees what we see. Does God care? Why does he not intervene? It he godless pagans that believe such things (Ps. 94:7; Ezek. 8:12; 9:9). This can lead to doubts about God's goodness, omnipresence, and his justice. This passage is to protect against despair and doubting God. When the world just seems *off*, Solomon reminds us that what is found to be *off* is our perception about how God works and moves in the world.¹

Introduction to the Text

Review. In the previous section (4:1-16), we saw Solomon give five “better than” statements to help guide God's people away from being perpetrators of oppression and injustice. They were to be people who were content and peaceful (4:6), work for others and not self (4:7-8), to work together rather than alone (4:9-12), and able to take advice rather than proud (4:13-16).

Preview. The previous two pericopes inform God's people *how to think* about injustice (3:16-22) and *how to live* in a world of injustice (4:1-6). This pericope addresses the fallen way that humans tend to respond to injustice and God (5:1-9). Solomon warns people not to be surprised by oppression and injustice, not to then make false promises about how they are going to change the world, which is offering the sacrifice of fools. Rather, the prescribed posture is a trusting attitude toward God and personal duty.

Fallen condition focus. This is needed because God's people tend to respond against him with anger, foolishness, and even accuse God of injustice. In essence,

¹ Jones and Pasarella, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 117.

people observe the world around them and believe they can do a better job than God at running the world. Therefore, Solomon informs his readers how they are to approach God in such situations in their heart, with their mouth, and their hands.

Structure. In the previous chapter, Solomon’s thoughts followed a common refrain of five “better than statements” (4:3, 6, 7-8, 9, 13). Of those five, only one (4:7-8) did not explicitly use the verbiage “better than.” In the current passage, Solomon the same refrain, except his thoughts in 5:1-9 is structured around only three “better than statements,” and 5:8-9 does not explicitly use the verbiage “better than.”

Solomon’s Better than Statements in Ecclesiastes 4-5			
The dead, unborn / the living	4:1-3	5:1-3	Listen / offer sacrifice of fools
Quietness / toil	4:4-6	5:4-7	Not vow / vow and not pay
Working for others / self	4:7-8	5:8-9	Work / be amazed
Two / one	4:9-12		
Poor, wise youth / old fool	4:13-16		

This section (5:1-9) is structured as follows:²

Structure of Ecclesiastes 5:1-7	
A: Positive (v. 1)	Go to the temple in humility, avoid the sacrifice of fools.
B: Negative (v.2)	No rash words, no hasty heart, because God is holy
C: Proverb (v.3)	Big dreams are the mark of a fool
A: Positive (v.4)	If you make a vow, fulfill it
B: Negative (v.5-6)	Make no vow that you cannot keep, else God punish you
C: Proverb (v.7a)	Big dreams are the mark of a fool
Conclusion: (7b-9)	Fear God, do not be surprised, do your work

Purpose. Since God’s people are informed by God’s word how God’s world

² Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:310.

should look, there can be a temptation to take matters into our own hands, especially when we are the ones who have been wronged. We can bring grievances to God in an ungodly manner, we can seek justice apart from the just Judge. Therefore, God's people are to "watch their feet" when they enter the presence of the Lord to worship him. God is the focal point, not an individual's complains, grievances, or opinions.³

Exposition of the Text

The passage can be summarized as follows: When injustice and oppression is observed in society, those who trust in God should respond with theology, not dreams and visions. If we are faithful to do so, we will trust God's sovereignty, providence, and please him by doing the work that is set before us.

5:1-2 – Humility is Better Than Pride

Solomon observes injustice and oppression and then exhorts his listeners to "guard their steps" (lit. feet) when they enter the house of the Lord (cf. Prov 4:20-27).

5:1. The phrase "house of God" occurs throughout the Old Testament in reference to a place of worship. Jacob first uses the phrase to identify the site of his dream about a ladder to heaven (Gen. 28:17). He even names the place Bethel, which means 'house of God' (Gen. 28:19). Scripture also designates the Tabernacle as 'the house of God' (Judg. 18:31; 1 Chron. 6:48). The Temple of Solomon is also referred to in the same way (1 Chron. 22:2; 2 Chron. 3:3).⁴

The word translated as "guard" carry the meaning of protection or watching over. However, the context clearly requires an understanding about the posture of the heart toward God. This exhortation is reasonable, because when the sovereignty of God is acknowledged (3:1-15), then oppression and injustice is observed in the world in

³ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 116.

⁴ Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 87–88.

which God is sovereign (3:16-4:16), then God's people are going to have question regarding theodicy. Yet, there is a foolish manner to bring questions to God. Here, Solomon offers another "better than" statement when he says it is better to draw near to listen to God than to offer the sacrifice of fools.

The LEB translates the phrase "they do not know they are doing evil," as "they sin without thinking," and the latter is the better translation. This indicates that the fool's sinful words, thoughts, and heart are natural to him – he does it without even needing to think about it.⁵ Solomon points to the proverbial fool, and he speaks to us and says it is better to draw near to listen than to act like him. When the Scriptures speak of listening, that is not simply something that is done in the moment by being quiet and waiting your turn to speak. The biblical perspective of listening requires patience, time, and preparation. In other words, in order to draw near to listen you must prepare yourself beforehand. When God spoke to his people, he required that they should first listen to him.⁶ Solomon then says listening to God is better than "the sacrifice of fools." The phrase "sacrifice" is literary satire. When a sacrifice was brought from the herd or flock, it was to be without blemish."⁷ Therefore, only the best was offered to God. When a fool approaches God, the "best" they have to offer God is their "many words," "dreams" or "business," and the moral assessment of this is "evil."

5:2. The first caution is against the mouth, but the heart addressed immediately after, and wisdom literature is full of warnings against hasty words.⁸ They originate in the heart and mind and then soon make their way to the mouth – and Solomon exhorts his readers to discipline their hearts and mouths. Therefore, when

⁵ Provan, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 116.

⁶ Deut. 4:1; 5:1; 6:3, 4; 9:1; Isa. 1:10; 7:13; 28:14.

⁷ Exod 12:5; Lev 1:3; Exe 34:22.

⁸ Ecc. 7:9; 8:3; Prov. 10:19; 20:21; 21:5; 25:8; 28:20, 22; 29:20; Ps. 115:3

someone comes to God, or God's people, with questions about God's governance of the world – the first inclination should not be to make a point, but to listen. In contemporary "cancel culture," the response is often immediate moral outrage with little to no inquiry or investigation. This is how a fools respond (Prov 18:13).

The reason for the evil assessment of this attitude is because the fool forgets that God is in heaven and he is on earth. This is not so much a disparity in distance as it is perspective. Therefore, there is an utter failure to recognize and honor the prominence of God and "presume[s] that he can be in a position of control when dealing with God.⁹ For Christians, the most grievous aspect of approaching God in this manner is that it neglects the avenue of communication that God has provided: prayer.

5:3-7 – Better No Vow Than a False Vow

Solomon observes another "better than" scenario and concludes that it is better not to vow than make a vow that you cannot keep. To do so would be sin and characterizes a "fool" who speaks before they think.

5:3. In the Old Testament, the word that is translated as "business" or "affair" appears only in the book of Ecclesiastes,¹⁰ and is used only in a pejorative manner. This condescending verbiage is used to describe a fool's dream which intentionally "points to how humans delude themselves into thinking that their work is more important than it actually is, which causes them to forget their place before God."¹¹ Both books of the Bible which Solomon authored speaks extensively to this:

Proverbs 18:2 – A fool takes no pleasure in understanding but only expressing his opinion.

Proverbs 17:28 – this shows that even a fool can keep himself from being more

⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 14:311.

¹⁰ Ecclesiastes 1:13; 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:3, 14; 8:16

¹¹ Jones and Pasarella, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 116.

foolish.

Ecclesiastes 10:14 – A fool multiplies words, though no man knows what is to be, who can tell what comes after him?

Ecclesiastes 10:15 – The toil of a fool wearies him

Ecclesiastes 10:12 – The words of a wise man’s mouth win him favor, but the lips of a fool consume him.

Additionally, we are given the tell-tale signs of such a fool: their “many words.” They speak, yet they are unable to deliver on the many words they speak. God’s people are to be anchored in immutable, eternal, and infinite words of God (Isa 40:6-8). God’s people should not “be swayed or seduced by finite human arguments made by finite, sinful humans with finite knowledge.”¹²

5:4. The clear lesson Solomon teaches is not to make promises that you cannot keep, and the best way to do that is to guard your heart and mouth when you come before the Lord and his people. This requires a humility toward the topic being spoken on, a posture of humility toward God and his word, and a humility of self-awareness of what a person can and cannot do.

5:5-6. A vow is simply a promise or a pledge that a person makes, and Lev 27:1-34 is the primary text in the Old Testament regarding vows.¹³ That an entire chapter is dedicated to making vows shows us that they were common in Israelite society, and God addresses making them in an honorable manner. This means that making promises, vows, private agreements (in legal terms), or covenants are not sinful. God himself makes vows, or covenants, with his people.

Yet, when the messenger of the temple returns to the person who made the vow to collect on it, they were not to tell the messenger that it was simply a mistake.

¹² Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 71.

¹³ Lev 27:1-8 is about people; 27: 9-13 is about animals, 27:14-25 is about land and property.

The emphasis here is on integrity of a person's words, which the Bible stresses.¹⁴ When a person fails to control their thoughts, it leads them to lose control of their mouth, and they speak words that leads them into sin. The anger of God is provoked by such foolery and dishonesty. In time, God destroys that person's work. Consider what Solomon wrote in the Proverbs?

Proverbs 18:6-7 – A fool's lips walk into a fight, and his mouth invites a beating. A fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to his soul.

5:7. With the increase of these dreams there is an increase of empty words. And Solomon calls a spade a spade. All of it is vanity, and it leads to sin. Solomon said, "Where words are many, there is no lack of transgression" (Prov 19:19). Human effort "with its many delusions and verbosity, stands in stark contrast with the transcendent, unmovable reality of God from whom a single spoken word outweighs everything on the timeline of eternity. So, rather than run one's mouth, it would be better to "fear God."¹⁵

5:8-9 – Better to Work than Vengeance

When injustice and oppression is observed in a society, God's people should not be surprised. Rather, we are to trust in God's sovereignty and providence, and we are to stay busy and faithful with the work given to each person.

5.8. Peter tells us that we are not to be surprised at the fiery trial (1 Peter 4:12-19), and Jesus tells his followers not to be supervised when the world hated them (1 John 3:13). So too, Solomon tells us not to be surprised when oppression and injustice is observed (Ecc 5:8). The reason he tells us not to be surprised is because the officials who are oppressors and commit injustice are watched by higher officials. This may not bring us much comfort, and the reason I would guess such a thing is because we tend to

¹⁴ Prov 20:25; Deut 23:21-23.

¹⁵ Jones and Pasarella, *Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, 117.

think that the next person up is just as corrupt. Yet, at the top of that latter is God himself, who sit enthroned above all the earth. He is not corrupt; he does not take bribes. This comes down to trusting in God and if he is running the governments, organizations, and all affairs in life in a just manner (Rom 13:1-8; 1 Peter 2:13-17). We are to trust God's word and his plans above all.

It is s not your job to hold them to account, that is God's job. God's justice will come to pass on his timing. The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations" (Ps 33:10-11). Charles Spurgeon, often called "the prince of preachers," said that the doctrine of God's sovereignty should bring us comfort in the middle of difficulty. He said:

There is no attribute more comforting to His children, than that of God's sovereignty. Under the most adverse circumstances, in the most severe trials—they believe that sovereignty has ordained their afflictions, that sovereignty overrules them, and that sovereignty will sanctify them all. There is nothing for which the children of God ought more earnestly to contend, than the doctrine of their Master over all creation—the kingship of God over all the works of His own hands—the throne of God and His right to sit upon that throne.¹⁶

May God's people trust in him in such a way that even oppression, injustice, and evil done against us does not make us sin against God.

5.9. Literally, it reads "Profit from land, in all, is this—a king in respect of a cultivated field." So, "society benefits from a king under whose reign private owners might profitably cultivate the land rather than the king seizing it for royal use (cp. Prov. 29:4). The king ensures that justice prevails and that the boundaries of one's field remain in force. In other words, a text like Proverbs 23:10–11 deals with matters within the king's authority."¹⁷ In other words, the best way to root out oppression and injustice is a godly king. If there is not a just king, then we are to entrust ourselves to the King.

¹⁶ Currid, *Ecclesiastes*, 72–73.

¹⁷ Barrick, *Ecclesiastes*, 97.

Redemptive Focus

Application. When godly men had questions about society, injustice, oppression, evil, and saw that the wicked even seem to prosper – the example given is that they presented their questions to God with humility. Consider the prophet Isaiah (Isa 6:5) or Habakkuk. Those who approached God in pride were humbled (Job 40:4).

Now, while you may not be a king with the authority to implement systemic oppression and injustice, you will have people sin against you at work. There are things that happen at church. There are things that happen in society. At some point in your life, you are going to be treated unjustly – people falsely accuse you, slander you, steal from you. And when we have been wronged, or feel we have been wronged, the temptation in our flesh is that we want to make things right. And the way our culture tells us to make things right is to gather a group of people, get a plan to make things right, even come up with a little slogan or catch phrase, maybe jump on social media, and then raise our voice loud enough, make enough angry posts, go on enough rants, so that the world can see, and so that we can try to get everyone on our side.

May God give us a heart that approaches that trusts him when we are wronged, when we are sinned against. God help us not to take matters into our own hands and fail to trust that all judgment has been entrusted by the Father to the Son. May God help us not to attempt to usurp his authority.

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