

A Guide To The Reader

Pastor recommends that to obtain maximum benefit from his comments you read in full from the Bible every reference whenever one appears. Otherwise the reading of the comments is simply a skimming over the surface. They are rather designed to make you stop and meditate and even look up further references as the Holy Spirit guides you. Do pray before you read that the Holy Spirit will be your Tutor and that the time you spend will be time spent with Him.

Ecclesiastes 5

5.1. Paul writes that we should know how we ought to behave ourselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Timothy 3.15). When we read an expression like this we are always to think along two lines. We are to think of the church as the family, the household, of the people of the Lord Jesus Christ. And we are to think of the actual entering into the sanctuary of the Lord to worship. Each passage on this subject should be tested to see which meaning fits best or if both are equally alike relevant. “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him” (Psalm 89.7).

“Keep thy foot” is picture language for “do not slip;” as we would say, “keep your footing.” There are two particular ways mentioned in this and the following verses in which we might err, and thereby offend Almighty God by the disposition of our thoughts in worship. One concerns our worship in Jesus’ name, our Substitute. The second concerns making vows.

“Hearing” is of paramount importance. “I will hear what God the LORD will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints: but let them not turn again to folly” (Psalm 85.8). “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 8.17). The Lord speaks to us by the Holy Spirit opening our minds to the significance of the words of the Bible and enabling us to act on them. The old priest Eli instructed the young Samuel to respond to the Lord’s calling by saying, “Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth” (1 Samuel 3.9-10). Samuel did exactly that and a very “distinguished career” followed as a consequence of that perpetual attitude. We should approach the reading of the Bible and the preaching of the gospel in exactly the same way, saying, “Speak, LORD, for thy servant heareth.”

All the Old Testament sacrifices were designed by the Lord God to point in one way or another to the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather than just presenting the required sacrifices habitually slavishly, it would have been good to seek to understand their significance. Most important of all would have been to believe by faith that God actually did forgive the offerer’s sins through the sacrifice substituting for the worshipper; and that in lieu, in anticipation of the death of Christ on Calvary. They do evil who enter into the courts of the Lord without an offering; and in bringing an offering do so heedlessly.

Our offering is the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ who became a substitution to make atonement for the sins of every believer, each of whom may say, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5.7).

Believers offer up spiritual sacrifices also by their faith. These are described as the consecration of our lives (Romans 12.1); praise and thanksgiving (Hebrews 13.15); and giving to and supporting believers in the front line (as Paul) or in need (as the Jerusalem saints) (Philippians 4.14-19; Hebrews 13.16).

5.2-3. For the most part, Protestants are not in the habit of making vows except in the matter of marriage vows. To be hasty reminds us of Esau, not that he made a vow, but that he wanted instant gratification and despised even such a valuable right as his birthright to get it, thus earning himself the disdain of God and the title of “profane.” (Genesis 25.29-34; Hebrews 12.16-17). It is possible to make vows equally rashly (even marriage vows) but they cannot be recalled simply because we have second thoughts. The misuse of a vow in quite another way is highlighted by the Saviour in the matter of Corban in Mark 7.9-13.

In the very apt illustration of a dream we are shown how the multitude of a foolish man’s words is never more disastrous than in church. “A dream cometh through the multitude of business.” So many things are our concern, so many things to be thought through at once. So these things affect the mind in sleep and resolve themselves into an amalgam, perhaps a jumble, of fleeting thoughts from apparently nowhere, or from times past mingling with the present. The multitude of a fool’s words are of no greater significance and such words, wide-ranging and of little consequence, should have no place in his worship.

5.4-5. Christians, for the most part, take the view that it is better not to vow at all, except the marriage vows. They, like all vows, should be kept. In case we should ever try to disown the vows we make then, it is part of the service that the congregation is called upon to bear witness that they were made to one another in the presence of God in a public service and in the presence of that congregation.

5.6-7. The word “angel” refers to whomever is God’s representative at the time. The officiating priest, or minister perhaps. The word “messenger” is the same word as “angel” and in Malachi 2.7 we have the words, “the priest’s lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth: for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.” That is, the angel. Paul writes to Timothy (1 Timothy 5.21), “I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things...” and also to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11.9-10), “neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man. For this cause ought the woman to have power on her head because of the angels.” Whatever be the precise significance of this latter passage it is clear that what is done publicly is done before the Lord’s messengers, earthly and, in some cases, heavenly. The Lord Jesus Christ appeared in the Old Testament as the captain of the host of the Lord (Joshua 5.14) but also as the Angel of the covenant (Genesis 48.16), which might even be the significance in this verse in Ecclesiastes.

Sarah laughed within herself but denied before the Angel that she had done so. The Scripture indicates that the one who remained to talk with Abraham was the LORD (Genesis 18.13) and she became afraid when she heard His comment to her husband Abraham. She denied her invisible transaction, her laughing within herself, which in the nature of it was unproveable. Except to God that is. When He said, “Nay; but thou didst laugh” that was a stinging rebuke from such a One (Genesis 18.9-15). Solomon threatens a more severe retribution, if God’s anger is aroused by denying that we meant what we said, when we did mean it at the time.

Whether words or dreams there is much that is superfluous. Our words, and most especially vows if we do make them, should be spoken in the reverential fear of God.

While not vows but oaths, when we swear in court that we speak only the truth, it will be a matter of God's severe retribution at the judgment day if we were playing fast and loose with Him when it was a matter of great importance for the establishing of the truth.

5.8. The Lord God, in each of His three Persons, is higher than the highest, He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords (Revelation 17.14;19.16). Proud monarchs and rulers of all sorts (especially minor autocrats) may deny it, but they are to be assured "there be higher than they." If they are unwilling to put a matter within their jurisdiction right, then ultimate judgment on that great Judgment Day is no mean thing. In a right-minded person that very thought should be sufficient to compel him to change his ways. Even, perhaps, for the wrong reason as in Luke 18.1-5.

5.9. Urban dwellers are apt to forget that they are dependent for food upon the land. "The king himself is served by the field." There is no getting away from it and we should render thanks to the Lord for all His goodness and pray for famine be averted.

5.10-11. In making all his observations from the perspective of a former backslider Solomon notes that a principle description of that state is dissatisfaction. Not dissatisfaction with one's lot merely, but dissatisfaction with wealth and all its trappings. The more you get, the more you want; whereas, as we have earlier noted, contentment (Hebrews 13.5) is the mark of a believer. Because of the believer's former unsaved lifestyle, however, he/she may have to be disciplined by the Holy Spirit's instruction in the scriptures to learn that contentment. We can produce or purchase more than we need and it is of no advantage. The same might be said of the purchasing of many books if they remain unread.

5.12. How many there are who would like to go home and leave their work behind them. We teach our children, in preparing them for life, that they must do homework as there is not enough time in school to teach them everything they need to know so soon! It is a great mercy to learn how to lay down one's work for the night. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6.34).

5.13-15. Solomon uses the expression "under the sun" from time to time to mean "all over the world, everywhere." It does not matter what the culture, or what the industry (or, indeed, what period of history) surplus riches invite robbery, murder, the efforts of security, and many other associated concerns, some of which were highlighted by the Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 12.14-20. "The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment." In an extended passage (Luke 12 13-34). the Lord Jesus invites us to consider these things in depth without the cynicism which backsliding brings into play. He concludes His strong teaching with, "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Solomon recalls Job's words, of which it is most probable he was fully aware, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away: blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1.21). The dead were usually clothed to be buried unless they died in battle and were stripped for spoils. It is picture language to

express that we arrive in this world with no resources, except a functioning body and the family background. We come with nothing and we leave all that we have worked for behind. Job's response was "blessed be the name of the Lord." It does not matter if we must leave all behind, in our turn, if we are entering into eternal life, the gift of God, with so much more in prospect than this world ever afforded, even if it was all subsequently lost.

5.16. It is not a sore evil, except to the unbeliever. The redeemed, though they lived under the curse "dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 4.19), as all do, yet enter into an immortal glory which more than makes up for whatever drawbacks life has brought us within the parameters of that curse. A believer does not "labour for the wind;" that is, for it all to be blown away. It is very disappointing when reverses occur, and a great swathe, perhaps, of life's work is obliterated, but faith in Christ and the working of all things together for good" (Romans 8.28) more than makes up ultimately for these things. And the testing of our faith, meanwhile, is the ultimate possession when it comes forth as gold and is found to be a matter of praise, glory and honour when the Lord Jesus Christ appears (1 Peter 1.7).

5.17. Darkness, sorrow, wrath, sickness. We can see that something is wrong. Yet this is the state of an unbeliever. How different from praise, glory and honour! It might be a better preparation for an unbeliever to be saved that he should appreciate this darkness, sorrow, wrath and sickness and turn to the Saviour for life (John 1.4; 5.24;14.6) than that he should be bright and breezy and blissfully unaware of his/her impending fate. However, as we see in Revelation 16.9,11) those who know darkness, sorrow, wrath and sickness do not always repent and may make matters worse by blaspheming God. "Curse God, and die" (Job 2.9) said Job's wife to Job. It would be better to retain our integrity by confessing our sin and the rightness of God to do with us as He pleases and to cry to Him for pardon and eternal salvation.

5.18-19. As we have seen the believer's portion is not merely for this life, but God is his portion for eternity (Psalm 16.5). It is "good and comely" to enjoy the good of all our labour, "giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5.20).

5.20. This part of the Preacher's sermon ends on an upbeat note. Provided only that the joy is not simply joie de vivre, the joy of living, but joy in Christ then for the pleasure of such joy much detail of our lives will remain forgotten. However, we must not write off the former days of our lives; for out of them has been wrought "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4.17).