



# Why Listen?

The wise person heeds the warnings gained from past mistakes and godly counselors.

## ECCLESIASTES 4:13–5:7

**MEMORY VERSE:** ECCLESIASTES 5:1

**STUDY** Ecclesiastes 4:7–5:7, noting Solomon’s words on the importance of leaders heeding warnings and making wise decisions. Highlight specific warnings regarding worship and keeping vows before God.

**CREATE** a teaching plan for your group using the ideas on pages 110–112. Reflect on mistakes you have made or warnings you have not heeded and how those choices affected your relationship with God. Look for ways of restating the Key Doctrine (Scripture) throughout the session: Scripture reveals the principles by which God judges us (Rom. 2:1–5).

**GATHER** the following items:

- Extra Personal Study Guides (PSGs)
- Chart paper and markers or white board markers

**Prepare to Display:**

- Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*)
- Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*)

**Make Copies of:**

- Pack Item 11** (*Handout: “Vanity” and “Under the Sun” in Ecclesiastes*)

**CONSULT** the weekly Explore the Bible adult podcast to gain insights on the go about this week’s study on Ministry Grid, Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, LifeWay’s Digital Pass, or at [goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training](http://goExploreTheBible.com/adults-training).

**REINFORCE** the study by encouraging the group to take the next step in fulfilling the promises they identified during the session.

## KEY DOCTRINE

### Scripture

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

# FIRST THOUGHTS

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.

(In PSG, p. 91) **What lessons from history do people rely on when living today? Why might a person ignore history and the lessons to be learned?**

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## 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?

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# UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

## ECCLESIASTES 4:13–5:7

Thus far, Solomon has encouraged the reader to enjoy God's good gifts of food, drink, and work. The warning has been to avoid making these good things into ultimate things, because they do not last. Again, one of the truths that Solomon has made clear is that all things achieved or built by humans will fade as vain and futile. Variations on the word *vanity* or *futility* are used nearly forty times in the Book of Ecclesiastes. The repetition of this word in the book as a whole, along with its definition, remind us that life is a vapor or breath. Life under the sun is fleeting and elusive. Therefore, the search for meaning and purpose in this life apart from God is also fleeting and elusive, like chasing after the wind. We are not transcendent over time but live and die within the time that God has allotted us.

The wise person understands this, and understands that God alone transcends time and history. In chapter 3, the Teacher exhorted the reader to fear God because of His sovereignty. Chapters 4–5 focus on God's holy and righteous character that sets Him apart as transcendent. Unlike the kings of the earth whose thrones do not last, God is eternal and will rule forever. Therefore, living for the things of this fleeting life is a vain pursuit. Living a life of wisdom before God is the proper goal of every creature under the sun.

God is to be approached with reverent awe or fear. The language of God being in heaven while we are on earth strikes at the very core of our humility. This truth reminds us that everything under the sun is finite and futile compared to God. There is no place for carelessness or vanity in the presence of God. Because all of life is lived before God, we should be humble

before Him in our worship, in our listening, and in our speaking. In this section of the book, the Teacher moved from abstract observations of life under the sun to concrete ways to live in wisdom. It teaches us that our primary focus in life should be on living a life that exemplifies the fear of God—living before Him with reverence and proper perspective.

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**WHEN LEADING** (ECCL. 4:13-16)

### Verses 13-16

The Teacher contrasted a **poor but wise youth** and an **old but foolish king** to remind leaders of the value of continually listening to wise counsel. He pointed to the cycle often seen in leadership as a king ascends, loses touch with his kingdom's changing needs, and eventually is discarded in preference of a new leader who then repeats the cycle.

In ancient Israel, the general consensus was that young people were foolish and old people were 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.

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.)

A life guided by human wisdom that reaches the pinnacle of human achievement and is exalted by the adoration of many **is futile and a pursuit of the wind**. This is medicine that needs to be given in a world where men and women wear themselves out striving after empires of dirt. People live, die, and are forgotten. This is true of even the greatest leaders and kings of history, as illustrated by one of them—Solomon of Israel.

This reminds us that it is never a lasting venture to build our own empires of dirt. In many cases, the leaders who strive to build their own empires close their ears to the wise counsel of others. Specifically, they close their ears to counsel that goes against their plans or warns them of folly in their endeavors. Of all people, Christian leaders must heed Solomon's words and willingly listen to wise counsel when leading.

The wisest counsel comes from the One who is greater than Solomon, namely, Jesus Christ. To those who seek to build their own empires of dirt, Jesus said to seek first His kingdom and righteousness. In a world where

### VERSES 13-16

<sup>13</sup> Better is a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer pays attention to warnings. <sup>14</sup> For he came from prison to be king, even though he was born poor in his kingdom.

<sup>15</sup> I saw all the living, who move about under the sun, follow a second youth who succeeds him.

<sup>16</sup> There is no limit to all the people who were before them, yet those who come later will not rejoice in him. This too is futile and a pursuit of the wind.

people despair in fear over living, dying, and being forgotten, Jesus comes to us with a promise: “I will never leave or forsake you.” There is wise counsel here for leaders, namely, to focus on what matters most. What matters most is the investment we make in the kingdom that will not end—not our kingdom but the kingdom of God.

**Why is it important that we regularly assess our lives to see if we are building our own kingdoms or working to build the kingdom of God?**

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## WHEN WORSHIPPING (ECCL. 5:1-3)

### Verse 1

#### VERSE 1

<sup>1</sup> Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Better to approach in obedience than to offer the sacrifice as fools do, for they ignorantly do wrong.

Solomon challenged worshipers to approach God with a heart for obedience rather than with meaningless rituals. He further encouraged worshipers to listen more than they speak when in the presence of God.

So many of Solomon’s ideas and observations are horizontally focused, musings on life “under the sun.” But on a few occasions he broke out of his cynical syndrome, which he did here with reflections on authentic worship. The very word, *worship*, comes from the idea of ascribing worth to God. Worship involves a holistic perspective on all of our lives. One of the things Solomon teaches us here is that God does not delight in religious ritual but in repentant worship.

First, we are taught to approach God in reverence—***guard your steps*** when you approach the sovereign God of the universe. 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.

In approaching God for worship, consider the nature of worship and your purpose in going. How often is our approaching God a mere formality? Throughout the Old Testament, we see this was a serious issue. Isaiah 29:13 warns us of the woes of Israel: “These people approach me with their speeches to honor me with lip-service, yet their hearts are far from me.”

If anyone thinks God could not care less about what is happening in his or her heart, they are sorely mistaken. ***Fools***, according to the end of verse 1, do not know how to keep from doing evil. They do evil even when they approach the house of God.

### Verses 2-3

Second, Solomon tells us to listen to God with reverence. When we approach God, our posture should be that of listening to what God has to say first. ***God is in heaven***, and we are ***on earth***. He is far above us, far superior to us. A shadow of this reality is shown when we meet someone of power. It is

customary when one meets royalty to be quick to listen. If you and I were to meet with our president, we would be told by a White House aide that we are not to speak until we are spoken to first. Our words are to be few because our first instinct in these situations is to be mindful, attentive, quick to listen, and slow to speak.

This speaks to how we are to approach God, even in prayer. We don't enter into the presence of God aimlessly running our mouths. It is no coincidence that Jesus, in Matthew 6:9, began the model prayer with these words: "Our Father in heaven." Before any petitions are made, there is an acknowledgment that God is in heaven. This brings our posture to patiently waiting in silence, in contrast to the fool who talks on and on.

The fool is not mindful or attentive. He does not listen. The fool fills the void with his words and posits his ideas and concerns before ever stopping to think: *maybe I should listen*. Solomon illustrated this point in saying that just as many concerns lead to anxious nights of fevered **dreams**, so too do **many words** reveal anxious foolishness. Many dreams accompany much labor, because one exhausted with the cares of this life will, in his or her exhaustion, lose touch with reality. This is a reminder to not lose touch with eternal reality. In order to hear God with reverence, you must first be attentive and listen.

In some ways the **fool's voice** reveals pride: "I know what's best." Or we could say that a fool's talk reveals a deep insecurity: "I am afraid of what's best." We don't like to be quiet, to stop and reflect—that may make us realize we are more dependent on God than we would like to think. It's much easier to fill the void with our words. But a reflection on the nature of prayer teaches us that prayer is never the first word; it is always the second word. God has the first word—and the last word.

The answer to our prayers is not so much focused on what we ask for, how we say it, or how many times we say it. Rather, it depends on God, who knows what is best for us. Therefore, we trust with humble hearts that He will answer, and we trust that how He answers is according to His will—believing that He knows best.

Waiting in prayer is a disciplined refusal to speak before listening to the God who has spoken. The key to listening to God with reverence is placing yourself in a position to hear God, and He has spoken in His Word. Instead of being hasty to speak, let your words be few.

It is important to have a gospel perspective in approaching God. In the Old Testament, people were required to bring sacrifices to God in the temple as a way of atoning for sin and as a way of entering into God's presence. This is why the Teacher reminded us that *God is in heaven* and we *are on earth*. There is a holy distance between God and sinful man. With the coming of Jesus, our Mediator, that distance has been bridged. Does that mean that reverence is no longer needed? Certainly not. It was at a great cost—the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of man—that we are able to enter into God's presence in full confidence, in humility, by the blood of His only Son.

We can enter the presence of God with confident, assurance of faith. (See Heb. 10:19-22.) But we also enter the presence of God in reverent repentance. Our faith keeps us from despair and fear that we have

## VERSES 2-3

<sup>2</sup> Do not be hasty to speak, and do not be impulsive to make a speech before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few. <sup>3</sup> Just as dreams accompany much labor, so also a fool's voice comes with many words.



no audience before God. Our repentance keeps us from pride, reminding us that our audience before God is a gift of grace through Christ. Without faith in Christ and repentance of sin, we approach God as fools, in useless ritual. When we approach God in Christ, it is deeply personal (new heart) and profoundly reverent (clean heart).

**Why is our posture for worship and prayer important as we approach God?  
In what ways does the good news of the gospel impact our posture?**

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## WHEN PROMISING (ECCL. 5:4-7)

### Verses 4-7

Solomon's last instruction in this passage is simple: do not harshly make a vow before God. Or, if you do make a vow, be hasty in fulfilling it. In fact, for this reason, it is better not to **make a vow** at all, lest it lead you into sin. (See also Deut. 23:21-23.)

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 other times 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 all the days of his life." In grateful response to the Lord granting her request, her husband offered a vow offering on their behalf in gratitude for what God had done (1 Sam. 1:9-28).

It is far **better** not to promise in the first place than to make a vow and not follow through. Do not let your mouth make a fool out of you; do not let your mouth make a sinner out of you. Don't let your empty words drag you into judgment. God is not a cosmic vending machine; nor is God someone to trifle with.

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.

There would be no need to double up on our words if we could be trusted

### VERSES 4-7

<sup>4</sup> When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because he does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow.

<sup>5</sup> Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it. <sup>6</sup> Do not let your mouth bring guilt on you, and do not say in the presence of the messenger that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry with your words and destroy the work of your hands?

<sup>7</sup> For many dreams bring futility; so do many words. Therefore, fear God.

as always truthful and faithful. This is why we often speak in vows. How many times have we said, “Honestly, I am telling the truth.” Or, “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” Vows exist because we are by nature untruthful. This should cause us to be somewhat suspicious of ourselves and the deception that is deep within our own hearts. When we speak to God or when we speak to others, we should allow our simplicity to safeguard our sincerity with an unadorned yes or no. This truth is governed by a deep reverence of the God who hears all our words and who will ask us to give an account for every word on the last day.

The wisdom literature of the Bible often teaches us that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. When we fear God, we revere Him and we stand in awe of Him. We come into His presence with reverence. We listen before we speak. And when we speak, we measure our words carefully. Now, perhaps you are reading this and are sitting under the weight of your sin.

Christ’s payment for our sin included our less-than-worthy worship, our foolishness in not listening to God, and our unfulfilled vows. Christ took on the payment for those sins as well, to wash us clean before our holy God. It is only by grace that we can approach God, listen to God, and speak to God. The great payment of God’s only Son will also give us a deep reverent confidence, that in Christ, we can approach God, hear God, and speak to God through Jesus our Mediator. Reverence for God will cause us to draw near and listen, rather than to run our mouths like fools. Reverence for God will cause us to not delay in keeping our word. Wise believers carefully weigh the promises they make to God and others, knowing they will be expected to keep any promises made.

**How do our words or keeping our word, affect our witness to others?**

**Why are our words such an important aspect of our witness in the world?**

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# LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

## FOCUS ATTENTION

**INTRODUCE:** As the group arrives, direct them to share a moment from their childhood or as a parent or grandparent when they should have listened to their parents or wish their own children or grandchildren had heeded the warnings.

**CONNECT:** *Solomon, as the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, indicated that the wise person heeds the warnings of past mistakes and accepts the wise counsel of godly counselors.*

**ASK:** *What lessons from history do people rely on when living today? Why might a person ignore history and the lessons to be learned?* (PSG, p. 91)

**TRANSITION:** *Today's session from Ecclesiastes shares the importance of listening to the warnings gained from past mistakes.*

## EXPLORE THE TEXT

**MINI-LECTURE:** Remind the group that Ecclesiastes records Solomon's reflections on the meaning of life. It is evident that Solomon recognizes his own personal failures and how he searched for meaning in the wrong places. Using **Pack Item 2** (*Outlines of Job and Ecclesiastes*) and **Pack Item 4** (*Poster: Worthwhile Pursuits?*), explain that Solomon resolved that pleasure, work, and wealth are all futile without God's purposes.

**TRANSITION:** *In Ecclesiastes 4–5, Solomon shared that life only makes sense when one acknowledges God.*

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 4:13-16**, as the group listens for how Solomon compared young and old in regard to a teachable spirit.

**EXPAND:** Read aloud Proverbs 16:31 and Job 12:12. Explain that many times older people are considered wiser than younger, but Solomon indicated that a young person who is willing to listen is wiser than an old king refusing to listen.

**DISCUSS:** Create teams of three and direct each team to discuss the following question: **What are the characteristics of teachable people, and how does one develop a teachable spirit?** (PSG, p. 94) Direct teams to record their responses and be prepared to share with the group. Allow time for sharing.

**REREAD:** Direct the group to reread silently Ecclesiastes 4:15-16, looking for a cycle that appears in life.

**DRAW:** On a white board or chart paper draw a circle. Around the circle write the words *anticipation, disappointment, and desire for change*.

**STATE:** *This cycle repeats itself over and over and is characteristic of the human condition. By human nature we seem to get tired and critical of those in authority whether in our home or job.*

**ASK:** **How is the cycle described by Solomon in this passage seen today?** (PSG, p. 94)



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**READ:** Invite one volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 5:1-3** and another volunteer to read 1 Samuel 15:22, encouraging the group to listen for admonitions concerning worship.

**IDENTIFY:** Lead the group to list the admonitions about worship revealed in these verses. Call for volunteers to state Ecclesiastes 5:1 in their own words. Encourage the group to memorize the verse and bring it to mind each time they join in corporate worship.

**ASK:** *Why are worshipers prone to approach God with meaningless rituals instead of hearts for obedience?* (PSG, p. 96)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Point to **Pack Item 11** (Handout: “Vanity” and “Under the Sun” in Ecclesiastes) to remind the group of all the times that Solomon identified as vanity or futility. Ask: *How can a heart that’s devoted to God provide meaning and fulfillment to a person’s life?*

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**READ:** Direct a volunteer to read **Ecclesiastes 5:4-7**, as the group looks for specific words or phrases that reveal the importance of keeping promises or vows.

**ASK:** *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?* (PSG, p. 97)

**DISCUSS:** Lead the group to explain why it is better to refrain from making a vow to God than to make a vow and fail to keep it.

**REFERENCE:** *Lying to God has serious consequences.* Remind the group of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11; their lies before God cost them their lives.

**TRANSITION:** *Religious rituals without fear of God and obedience are meaningless.*

## SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE

**REVIEW:** Guide a discussion of the bulleted statements under Apply the Text (PSG, p. 99). Encourage the group to modify or add to the statements.

**ASK:** *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?* (PSG, p. 99)

**EVALUATE:** Explain that from time to time, everyone procrastinates on promises we’ve made—to spend more time in God’s Word, to volunteer time to a certain charity, or to schedule coffee with a friend who needs to hear about Christ’s love and forgiveness. Ask: *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?* (PSG, p. 99)

**PRAY:** Close in prayer, asking God to help us heed warnings and learn from past mistakes as we follow Him in obedience. Ask that He will not let us delay in fulfilling our promises to Him and that we will honor Him in all of our worship.

## OPTIONS

Use these options to supplement and enhance the group plans on the previous pages.

### MUSIC

Secure a copy of the song, “With Lifted Hands,” by Ryan Stevenson and Christopher Stevens. Familiarize yourself with the lyrics and utilize the verses and chorus throughout the group time. Also consider playing the song as the group arrives.

### DEBATE

Pre-enlist two volunteers to lead each side of a debate. The topic of the debate will be whether age results in more wisdom than youth. Assign the volunteers to either the pro or con side, instructing them that they will be limited to two minutes to present their cases. If time permits, each side could have one minute for a rebuttal. Follow the debate with an examination of Ecclesiastes 4:13-16.

### CASE STUDY

*Gather pencil and paper for each team.*

As a group, construct a list of possible scenarios where believers fail to keep their promises to God (examples: tithing, accepting a leadership position, spending more time in personal Bible study, or forgiving someone’s past offense). Create teams, directing each team to select one scenario from the list and construct a case study using fictional names. Each case study should be two to three sentences in length and close with the question, “What steps would this person need to make in order to move closer to fulfilling his or her promise to God?” Allow time for each team to report.

### RESEARCH

Pre-enlist someone to prepare a presentation on vows in the Bible. Direct the volunteer to consult a Bible dictionary and/or commentary to support their study. Encourage the person to share a basic definition of a *vow* and review key Bible passages looking for common themes related to vows or promises made to God. Call for the volunteer to present his or her findings to the group (Bible Skill, PSG, p. 95).

### VISUAL

*Gather paper and markers.*

Divide into teams of two, providing each pair with paper and markers. Direct each team to construct a poster using either words or pictures that would summarize Ecclesiastes 5:1-7.

### REFLECTIVE

Lead a discussion of ways to prepare for worship. First identify potential problems with preparing (short on time, parenting distractions, health concerns, etc.). Then guide the group to discuss practical ways they can focus their hearts and minds on Jesus before entering a time of worship. Provide ideas for both corporate and private worship.