

# Ecclesiastes 5:1-3

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-5/ecclesiastes-51-3/>

*When we approach God, we ought to do so with a pure desire to listen and obey rather than seeking ways to get God to do our bidding. Listening takes effort, but it is the path to wisdom.*

Solomon now shifts from observation to instruction. To this point Solomon has steered us toward faith as the only foundation from which to live a life of meaning and purpose. The alternative is to live a life of *madness*. Faith allows the mystery of life to be a source of joy, contentment, and purpose. When we rely on human reason and experience to discover life's purpose, the nagging uncertainty of life leads to frustration and folly. Meaning and purpose come from faith in God and His benevolence toward us. A purposeful life stems from believing that life is a gift, that we should live to please God, and that ultimately we will appear before Him at the Judgment.

In Chapter 5, Solomon begins to instruct us on how to effectively live a life of gratitude and faith. Solomon shifts from reflection to instruction, to show us what this looks like. This is evident in the grammar: so far, Solomon has toggled between first and third person; here he begins a new way of speaking—direct instruction (second person).

Solomon begins with instruction on how to approach God. It would be human nature to approach God with a long list of desires. Like approaching Santa at Christmas. But Solomon instructs us to approach the *house of God* to listen.

This begins with careful humility, to *guard our steps*. Our recognition that apart from God we cannot fully comprehend the world around us ought to cause us to have such humility. We can't find meaning and purpose on our own, so we ought to listen to God. We have the amazing opportunity to *go near* with the intent *to listen, rather than offer the sacrifice of fools*.

In Solomon's era, an integral part of worship was the *sacrifice* of animals. Most of the time the animal was cooked and eaten afterward, with a part being provided to the Levites (those who tended the Temple and led religious practice). Solomon does not specify what the sacrifice of a fool is. But he makes it clear that it is done out of ignorance, for the fool *does not know the evil he is doing*.

There are biblical examples of sacrifices God rejected that might clue us in on what Solomon has in mind. The first that occurs in the Bible is the sacrifice of Cain in [Genesis 4](#). It seems likely that God did not favorably regard Cain's sacrifice not because of what Cain brought, but because "his deeds were evil" ([1 John 3:12](#)). It is clear that what God really cares about is the heart. This is likely why God provided the following instruction to Cain after Cain was angry that his sacrifice was rejected.

"If you do well, will not your countenance be lifted up? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it."

([Genesis 4:7](#))

A similar example is found in [1 Samuel 15](#), where God told King Saul "Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" ([1 Samuel 15:22](#)). Saul did the sacrifice, but not to please God. He did it to get the people to follow him.

The New Testament book of Hebrews spends considerable time instructing the believing Jews to whom the letter was written not to rely on sacrifices to please God. In the day of Judgment, sin will be judged by a God who looks at our actions and our hearts. We can't "bribe" God to be pleased with us through religious observance.

These examples might provide insight as to how someone can be *doing evil* through a religious observance.

The *fool* approaches the *house of God* with the intent of *sacrifice*. Solomon says *he does not know the evil he is doing*. It seems in this instance the person is doing the *evil* out of ignorance. Solomon is instructing on how to gain wisdom in order to avoid such foolishness. The point of worship is not to bribe God to gain His favor. The point is to focus upon God and *listen*. *Let your words be few*.

We should approach the *house of God* to *listen and obey*. The Lord beckons us to *listen*. He is not looking for a *sacrifice* as though He had need of something. God does not sell favors. Everything is already His. God does not need us. We need Him.

One thing that will help us *listen* is to not be *hasty to bring up a matter in the presence of God*. Solomon says *do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought* in God's presence. We should not approach God with our minds made

up what is best for us, then seek to *sacrifice* something in order to get God to do our bidding. We should come to God seeking guidance. We should *let our words be few*.

The word translated *thought* in the phrase *do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought* is “leb” in Hebrew, which is usually translated *heart*. Words flow from thoughts that we dwell on within our hearts. This seems to be speaking of our entire perspective. Our worldview. Our attitude. When we worship we should focus on getting our perspective aligned with God’s perspective. With what is true. To treat God as though He is a genie in a bottle is the perspective of *fools*.

Wise worship is to seek after God to determine the best way to think. To shape our perspective based on faith in God. To lean into the mystery of life by trusting and listening to God. Solomon has already made it clear that seeking understanding apart from faith is futile. So it makes sense that he would also instruct us that coming to God with our minds already made up, seeking God in order to validate our own direction is a *sacrifice of fools*.

Solomon is warning us to be deliberate in seeking understanding through worship. A part of that is recognition of reality. *God is in heaven and you are on the earth*. Solomon tried to discover meaning and purpose through reason and experience, but found it vaporous. To gain knowledge of purpose we need the perspective of *God who is in heaven*. Since God has this perspective, and it is impossible for us to gain it apart from Him, it makes sense to be quick to *listen* to Him rather than rely on our own wisdom, wealth, or labor.

Solomon beckons us to reach beyond our own capacity to gain understanding, for *we are on the earth*. He instructs us to not be *hurried* with our own *thoughts* as we approach *God* but to be postured to *listen* in recognition that God is God and we are not.

How long should we wait on God? How much time listening to God is sufficient? Solomon answers: *A dream comes through much effort*. Listening is work. The word translated “*dream*” is most often used in the Old Testament to refer to night visions, often a revelation from God. An example is from [Job 33:14-17](#), from a speech of Elihu:

“Indeed God speaks once,  
Or twice, yet no one notices it.  
“In a dream, a vision of the night,

When sound sleep falls on men,  
While they slumber in their beds,  
Then He opens the ears of men,  
And seals their instruction,  
That He may turn man aside from his conduct,  
And keep man from pride;”

In [Job 33:15](#), God is instructing through a dream. A night vision that is designed to turn man away from pride. Since *dreaming* in [Ecclesiastes 5:3](#) is connected to *much effort* and *an abundance of occupation*, it could include the notion of God speaking to our spirit, or to our subconscious, the part of us that dreams, as we strive through life.

This would tell us to pay attention for God speaking as we go about our everyday business. The word translated *occupation* is “inyan.” “Inyan” appears eight times in Ecclesiastes, and is translated “task” six times. It means everyday business.

Perhaps merging the applications of [Ecclesiastes 5:3](#) and the Job passage, listening for instruction from God in the “dream” as we strive through life keeps us from pride. Conversely, speaking *many words* is the pathway to becoming a *fool*.

The context would also support interpreting the *dream* as referring to a plan for the future that we dreamed up ourselves. Old Testament passages such as [Jeremiah 29:8](#) seem to use the Hebrew word in this way. The context of this section deals with foolish worship, going to the house of God with the idea of “What do I have to do or say in order to get what I want?” Solomon could be saying not to treat God like a magic genie. If you have a dream, then don’t just look for magic ways for it to happen. Put in the *effort* it takes to make it happen. If all we do is talk about it, then we’re just being foolish.

Similarly, asking God to do something for us when we haven’t first put in the *effort* to seek God’s instruction is foolish. Just as drowning out God’s voice with *many words* of petition is foolish worship. True worship is listening to God, then putting His words into action in our “inyan,” the daily business of life.

### **Biblical Text:**

**<sup>1</sup>Guard your steps as you go to the house of God and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know they are doing evil. <sup>2</sup>Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a**

**matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore let your words be few. <sup>3</sup>For the dream comes through much effort and the voice of a fool through many words.**