

Ecclesiastes 5:4-7

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-5/ecclesiastes-54-7/>

Solomon continues his advice on how we ought to behave in our interactions with God, warning us against the dangers of improper oaths and suggesting a powerful alternative: keep your promises.

Verse 4 admonishes us to *not be late* in *paying our vow to God*. When a valid vow is made to God, its fulfillment must not be delayed. Since a vow is completely voluntary, it is better to not vow than to vow and not pay. God keeps His promises. Solomon is very direct in admonishing us to *pay what you vow*, following God's example by following through with what you say. Our greatest joy in life is for God to take *delight* in our actions. But He *takes no delight in fools*, for it is a fool who promises something to God then doesn't follow through on their promise.

This is similar to the previous section, where we are advised against approaching God as though He is a magic genie, seeking to find the right words to get Him to do our bidding. In this case we made a vow, likely to get God to do something for us (like when someone says, "If you just get me out of this desperate situation, I will never question you again"), then afterwards try to wiggle out of the vow by saying we made a *mistake*.

The root for the word translated *pay* in the phrase *pay what you vow* is "shalam." This is the Hebrew word traditionally celebrated as the word for peace. The idea here is that an unfulfilled promise brings strife, tension. Strife is resolved, brought to peace, when the promise is paid. Solomon shows us two ways we can disrupt the peace of fellowship with God. First, we delay in fulfilling our *vow*, or promise. We also break the peace of fellowship if we are *late in paying it*. Offer to do only what you are capable and willing to do. Only what you intend to fulfill. Count the cost. Do not promise more than you are devoted to deliver. Perhaps the reason we delay *fulfilling a vow* is because we view God in a transactional manner. Now that we have what we wanted, we think we have negotiating leverage, and can withhold what we promised.

The second way we can harm the "shalam," the peace of fellowship, is to say we made a *mistake* in the *presence* of a *messenger* who might be holding us accountable. We are directed to not plead ignorance. The claim that *my vow*

was a mistake holds no water. If we make a commitment, it is not acceptable to change our mind afterward. God expects us to keep our promises. God knows the thoughts and intents of the heart, so it is foolish to think we can scam Him ([Hebrews 4:12](#)).

Solomon might have in mind a priest officiating a peace-offering vow. He might act as a kind of *messenger* by acting as witness to the vow and creating human accountability for what was being dedicated to God. There was no “de-vowing” procedure in Leviticus, which supports Solomon’s instruction to be careful what we vow to God. The word translated *mistake* is the word used in Leviticus for *unintentional sins*, sins that an Israelite would commit unwittingly. Then, afterwards when he would realize that he had done something wrong, he could make a purification offering.

Solomon’s instruction might apply to someone trying to get out of paying their vow through attempting to invoke this *mistake* provision of the Levitical code. That might allow them to substitute a cheaper sacrifice in place of following through on a more costly or more difficult vow. This would be a way of getting out of the original vow but still clinging to the illusion of obedience. This is another illustration of foolish worship. As though God can be tricked. It is clear that there will be negative consequences for treating God in such a manner.

Solomon might have learned from his father David about how much God cares about keeping promises. God brought a three-year famine upon Israel during the time of King David. David inquired of the Lord and the Lord answered, “It is for Saul and his bloody house, because he put the Gibeonites to death” ([2 Sam 21:1](#)). Joshua had agreed to a treaty to protect the Gibeonites over four hundred years earlier ([Joshua 9](#)). Saul broke that treaty, and God was holding Israel accountable. God is serious about keeping our word to others. Solomon extends this principle to keeping our word to God.

Solomon sums up this section about appearing before God with a question/answer combo. *Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?* The only *voice* referred to in this section is the *speech that caused one to sin* by saying *in the presence of the messenger of God that taking the vow was a mistake*. We are still in the context of delaying paying a vow, or trying to get out of paying a vow by saying it was a *mistake*. God will *destroy the work of one’s hands* for this breach of integrity. The root “qatsaph,” translated *angry*, literally means “to burst out in rage.”

The way to prevent this is to make sure when you make a *vow* to God, that you *not be late in paying it*. It is appropriate to *fear God*. As we have seen previously in Ecclesiastes, God is the judge of all. Every action will have an appropriate consequence. The *fear* of God will lead to paying the vow as promised, without making excuses. *Words* and *dreams* lead to *emptiness*. What is constructive is taking actions consistent with stated intentions. Make a vow, keep the vow.

Treating God as though He is our very powerful servant risks making God *angry* to the point where He would *destroy the work of your hands*. This could refer to several possibilities. The New Testament book of Romans states that God's wrath pours out upon those who walk in disobedience. One way that occurs is through the agency of government, which God gave to punish bad behavior ([Romans 13:4](#)). The government certainly has the power to *destroy the work of your hands*.

Another way God pours out His wrath is by giving us over to our flesh, to the point of slavery and addiction, and a debased mind ([Romans 1:24-28](#)). This is the judgment of God's wrath upon us by giving us over to our base desires—giving us what we wanted. The resulting progression into depravity would also lead to the destruction of *the work of your hands*. It could also apply to the deeds we do on earth burning at the judgment, as wood, hay, and stubble would burn ([1 Cor 3:11-15](#)).

Solomon makes an application, stating: *For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness*. This has immediate application to making a *vow to God* to do something you don't really intend to do. It was just *dreams and many words*. As a dream is not real, this *vow* was not real. It was all talk, *many words*, rather than a plan resulting in action. This use of *dreams* in this passage, empty *words* would support the "interpretation of dreams" in verse 3 as something someone dreams of happening (as opposed to a dream of God's instruction). Intentions don't get it done. If we *fear God* we need to turn intentions to action.

Biblical Text:

⁴When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! ⁵It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands? ⁷For in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. Rather, fear God.