LESSON 5

TAKING YOUR TROUBLES TO CHURCH

Ecclesiastes 5:1-20

In this lesson we learn four things not to do when troubles come.

OUTLINE

You've heard "there are no atheists in foxholes." Meaning, when the battle heats up, we're eager to do a deal with God. If that doesn't work, we're quick to blame Him—or the government. Or wish we could buy our way out of trouble. All of these are vanity, Solomon says.

I. Don't Blame God for Your Situation
- A. Walk Carefully Before Him
- B. Talk Cautiously to Him

II. Don't Bribe God With a Vow

III. Don't Be Surprised at the Government's Response

IV. Don't Believe the Lie About Riches
- A. Five Things You Should Know About Money
- B. Two Things You Need to Know About God

OVERVIEW

The week before I was to preach on Ecclesiastes 5:1-20 in our church, devastating wildfires swept through our county in California. A number of people in our church lost everything they owned, and the fires were within one mountain ridge of reaching our church campus, including our schools. But they were spared. I told my wife at the end of that week, "I am so glad I am a preacher of the Word of God." How else would we know how to respond to the devastation that sometimes comes upon us?

All of us experience tragedies and reversals in our lives at some point, and the principles in this section of Ecclesiastes will help you through those times just as they helped our church family recover from a devastating week.

Don't Blame God for Your Situation

It is so easy to blame God when disaster strikes. But Solomon warns us to walk carefully before God and talk cautiously to God. We must measure our steps as well as our words before laying blame where it doesn't belong.

Walk Carefully Before Him

We get our expression "Watch your step" from Solomon's words in verse 1: "Walk prudently" (literally, "Keep your foot"). When we draw near to God, we are not to bring the sacrifice of fools. Don't act hastily or irrationally.

The purpose of coming into the house of God is to listen and learn, not to storm in with our agenda. Fear, reverence, and honor should characterize our attitude toward God when we draw near to Him. We should not make the mistake Saul made, thinking that outward worship could cover a disobedient heart. Instead of doing what God told him, Saul amended God's instructions. He let his agenda take precedence over God's (1 Samuel 15). As a result of his actions, the kingdom was taken from Saul; and David was anointed to replace him as king.

God's concluding words to Saul were, "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22).

We are to be careful when we interact with God, that we walk carefully before Him, fully obeying what He expects us to do—and not blaming Him for things that happen which impact us negatively. In *Pilgrim's Progress,* John Bunyan wrote years ago, "In prayer, it is better to have a heart without words, than words without heart."

Talk Cautiously to Him

These verses sound a lot like James in the New Testament: Be careful with your tongue! We are so quick to assign blame—yes, even blame God—when things go against us. God did not start the fire that burned near our home. In this particular case, the authorities believe an individual did. So why do we blame God?

As Christians, anytime we grouse and complain about life, we are blaming God. If we truly believe He is over all things, then it must be His fault that an inconsiderate driver cut me off on the freeway. Be careful about complaining. Directly or indirectly, you are blaming God for what has happened.

Solomon reminds us that God is in heaven and we are on earth. He sees everything, we see very little. If we knew everything God knows, we wouldn't complain and blame God as much as we do. If you had the ability to instantly trace back every cause-and-effect event leading up to the latest disaster in your life, you might be more careful about assigning blame. God sees all those events and knows why everything happened. We need to blame less and trust Him more.

Verse 3 suggests that we are sometimes fools—we babble on relentlessly like a man who has had dream after dream. We need to be careful with our speech, especially where God is concerned. Blaming God for things that go wrong is a dead-end street that goes nowhere—except to further confusion and despair.

Don't Bribe God With a Vow

Have you ever made a deal with God in the face of impending doom? "Lord, please spare me and I'll become a missionary." It's why they say there are no atheists in foxholes. When the battle gets heavy, everybody wants to play *Let's Make a Deal* with God. If you ever do make a commitment to God, make sure you keep it. And make sure it isn't an "I'll do this if You'll do that." Leave the deal-making to the politicians.

Here is the New Living Translation of verses 6-7:

> Don't let your mouth make you sin. And don't defend yourself by telling the Temple messenger that the promise you made was a mistake. That would make God angry, and he might wipe out everything you have achieved. Talk is cheap, like daydreams and other useless activities. Fear God instead.

It is far better to fear God than to speak rashly and have to explain ourselves later. Why does a difficult circumstance in life cause us to take back all that we have said we believe about God? There is no time like tragedy and difficulty to cast yourself totally on what you believe about God—His sovereignty and His goodness. The words that come out of our mouth cannot be retrieved and stuffed back in. Once they are spoken, we either have to shamefully repent or harden our heart against God.

I love what David said in the Psalms as he thought about a vow he had made. Psalm 66:13-14:

> I will go into Your house with burnt offerings;
> I will pay You my vows,
> Which my lips have uttered
> And my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble.

Vows in times of trouble were common in the Old Testament, and here we see David keeping his vow. But there must have been plenty of instances where people didn't keep them as evidenced by Solomon's words. Remember: Don't make deals with God and if you make a promise, keep it.

Don't Be Surprised at the Government's Response

You may be surprised at the heading for this section, but I am not making this up. Solomon warns his readers about the actions of government officials. In short, don't be surprised when you see injustice and inequity in government.

It seems the government gets blamed today for almost everything. Next to God, they get blamed the most, sometimes inappropriately. If we take Solomon's advice, we won't be so surprised when the government helps itself more than they help those they are supposed to serve. As for corruption in the government (at least in Solomon's day), "If you see . . . the violent perversion of justice . . . do not marvel at the matter" (verse 8, NLT).

The government's problem is the same as mine and yours: It's human. Sometimes they do good and sometimes they don't. Solomon says not to invest your energy in criticizing human corruption. Instead, recognize it's going to happen and do what you can to fix it. As bad as government can be, it is better than lawlessness. Bad government is better than no government. We should try to make it better, but we should not pin any of our hopes on it. It is a flawed, human institution.

Don't Believe the Lie About Riches

Our temptation, when problems arise, is to think that a little more money would solve the problem. Or maybe it would have prevented it altogether. Solomon warns us against such illogical thinking by giving us five things we should know about money.

Five Things You Should Know About Money

This is a profound and practical commentary on money and financial integrity, tucked away in an Old Testament book that few Christians have read.

1. The More You Have, the More You Want

   "He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver," Solomon says. If you think really wealthy people are not trying to accumulate even more, you are wrong. Once the richest man in America, when John D. Rockefeller was asked how much money is enough, he replied, "Just a little bit more." Jesus warned against making greed and covetousness the core of one's life (Luke 12:15).

2. The More You Have, the More You Spend

   "When goods increase, they increase who eat them," is Solomon's warning. This is like the law that says, "Expenses rise to meet available income." And it's true! It's almost impossible for the average American to put the brakes on his cost of living. When a salary raise comes along, up goes the lifestyle and related expenses. In *Changing the Wind*, William McDonald wrote, "When a man's possessions increase, it seems there's a corresponding increase in the number of parasites who live off him: *management consultants, tax advisers, accountants, lawyers, household employees, and sponging relatives.*"[1]

3. The More You Have, the More You Worry

   "The abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep," Solomon wrote. When the wildfires came near our house, we were ordered to grab our valuables and evacuate. Driving away from the house, I told my wife, "It only took ten minutes to grab what is really valuable to us." Most of what every family has is "stuff" that is not worth losing a night's sleep over. When the aforementioned Rockefeller was the world's only billionaire at age 53, he worried so much about his money that his health deteriorated dramatically. He lived on crackers and milk. When he learned to give money away, his health changed; and he lived until he was 98 years old. Money is not worth losing your health over.

4. The More You Have, the More You Lose

   "Riches . . . perish through misfortune," warned Solomon. When the wildfires struck, the more people had, the more they lost in the fires. We're setting ourselves up for heartache by collecting "stuff." The more we have, the more we have to lose.

5. The More You Have, the More You Leave

   "As he came from his mother's womb, naked shall he return," is Solomon's final warning. When a rich man died, someone asked, "How much did he leave?" The answer is, "All of it." The more you accumulate in your lifetime, the more you are going to leave for others who contributed nothing to earning it. There's nothing wrong with leaving an inheritance. There is just a great irony in spending a lifetime building wealth and then handing it over to others in the end.

Let's be clear: There's nothing wrong with having money, but there is something seriously wrong with putting your hope in money.

Two Things You Need to Know About God

We conclude this section with learning about two gifts God has given which deserve our gratitude.

1. Your Ability to Earn Money Is a Gift From God

   There are no "self-made men" in this world. Every person who has ever earned money has done so because of the abilities given to him by God. Solomon does not say we shouldn't be interested in earning money, having money,

or living well. We just need to remember that it is God who gives the ability to earn money and prosper, and to Him should flow our gratitude. When our nation goes through down times economically, every person with a job is thankful for it. That should be our attitude all the time. It is our heritage from God (gift from Him) to "enjoy the good of all [our] labor in which [we] toil."

2. Your Ability to Enjoy Money Is a Gift From God

   "As for every man to whom God has given riches and wealth, and given him power to eat of it, to receive his heritage and rejoice in his labor—this is the gift of God" (verse 19). Our enjoyment of what God has provided is also "the gift of God." Have you considered that before? Have you stopped to thank God for the joy you share with friends and family when the money you have earned makes possible an enjoyable evening or a weekend trip or a summer vacation? We work and sweat and toil for what we have, forgetting that it is all the gift of God to us. There is nothing wrong with hard work (Genesis 3:17-19), but there is something wrong with anxiety about work and its results.

If we would just faithfully open our hands and thank God for the ability to work and thank God for the grace to enjoy both our work and the fruit of our labor, we would be more blessed. Putting Him first, in our work and in the enjoyment of its rewards, is the key.

Remember: Don't blame God, don't bribe God, don't be surprised at the government's failures, and don't believe the lie about riches. When troubles come, keep your eyes on Him and thank Him for it all; and you'll be glad you did.

Note

1. William McDonald, *Changing the Wind* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 47.

PERSONAL QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-3. As Christians, how are we to respond to devastating events in our lives?

   a. Why shouldn't we blame God when bad things happen to us?

   b. What two warnings does Solomon give us to avoid blaming God? Elaborate on each.

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   c. Describe what it means to walk carefully before God in our lives.

   d. What does complaining about life translate to?

   e. Have you ever blamed God for something negative that has happened in your life?

f. Why do we oftentimes blame God for the problems in our lives?

g. What is a practical way we can avoid doing that in the future?

2. Have you ever tried to make a deal with the Lord?

a. Why does Solomon warn us against this?

b. How does Psalm 66:13-14 reiterate this idea?

3. Have you ever gotten worked up about things of this world that don't matter?

a. Why is it futile to do this?

b. How can we not worry about injustice while also not becoming indifferent to others' suffering?

GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Read Ecclesiastes 5:10-17 and discuss the following questions: What are five things we should know about money based on the following verses?

   a. Verse 10

   b. Verse 11

   c. Verse 12

   d. Verses 13-14a

   e. Verses 14b-17

   f. Is there anything wrong with having money? Where does the problem with money lie?

2. What two things can we remember about money that can encourage us not to place too much value on it?

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a. Why is remembering these things important?

3. Discuss the following questions from the personal questions with the group:

a. As Christians, how are we to respond to devastating events in our lives?

b. Read Ecclesiastes 5:1-3 as a group. Why shouldn't we blame God when bad things happen to us?

c. What two warnings does Solomon give us to avoid blaming God? Elaborate on each.

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d. Explain what it means to walk carefully before God in our lives.

e. What does complaining about life translate to? Why is this wrong?

f. Why do we oftentimes blame God for the problems in our lives?

g. What is a practical way we can avoid doing that in the future?

h. How can the group encourage each other to be positive through hard times?

DID YOU KNOW?

In the Old Testament, a voluntary vow was a promise to God by an individual to perform some service in return for God's acting for the benefit of the one making the vow. For instance, Jacob made a vow to tithe to God of his possessions and make Bethel a memorial to God in return for God's protection and provision on a journey (Genesis 28:20-22). Vows were always voluntary, but once made, they were binding (Deuteronomy 23:21-23; Judges 11:35; Psalm 66:13). But vows could be redeemed at a price set by a priest. Fathers could veto daughters' and wives' vows; but if a husband let a wife's vow stand and then caused her to break it, the fault was his, not hers. Jesus warned against the abuse of vows (Matthew 5:33-37) as did James (5:12).

