

A Study of the Wisdom Literature

(OT Survey Lesson 297—Eccl. 4:1-5:7)

Introduction: Beginning with this section, the preacher’s observations of life under sun are more specific. He shows the vanity that is often found in life’s relationships and offers balancing advice about to handle them.

The preacher’s remarks are based on the principles he has established in 2:24-3:22. In this section of the book the preacher considers various themes and explores them from the two world views that he has already proposed. Each time it is clear that the position of faith provides the only satisfactory approach to life.

Lesson aim: To learn wisdom in dealing with others and also with God.

Observations about human relationships—Eccl. 4:1-16

1. What social phenomenon did the preacher address in v. 1? What vanity did he see in it? What then was his reaction to this vanity? (v. 2-3)

Solomon saw vanity in a world of oppression. When men ought to feel a commonality that makes them love and help one another, they often use and abuse one another. Oppression in ancient times came from various sources: 1) wicked rulers; 2) greedy businessmen; 3) masters of households. From the “life under the sun” standpoint, the only remedy would be hope of death as the only relief. Solomon does not venture an answers from the standpoint of faith; but we know what it is: God will bring all things to judgment. The oppressor must ultimately pay. This idea has just been given in chapter three and the writer will include it in his summary.

2. What other grounds of vanity did the preacher observe? (v. 4) However, what words of wisdom did he give about our work? (v. 5-6)

An additional source of vanity is the competition that exists among men. Even business and work itself is often the manifestation of a greedy isolation rather than a desire to join together with others in toil that is beneficial and useful to all.

Yet, there must be balance. To refuse to work is self-cannibalism. To work to exhaustion without rest is foolish and vain; for it partakes of all that vanity that comes when men live only for the material world and forget God. This is point the preacher has already made clear.

3. How did the preacher’s observations of man without relatives suggest vanity? (v. 7-8)

Solomon observes a man who works; but has no one with which to share the fruits of his labor. Again, the vanity of loneliness and isolation is seen. This man works and does not contemplate for whom is lie knocking himself out.

4. What advantages or benefits did the preacher see in having relationships with others? (v. 9-12)

There are real advantages in companions, just as Solomon has shown real vanity in isolation and loneliness—productiveness, help, security, strength.

5. What observation did the preacher make about those who govern others? (v. 13) What things did he observe about the king and his replacements that suggested the vanity of life? (v. 14-16)

The next illustration probably continues the theme of isolation. Solomon contemplates a king with whom wisdom should reside by dint of age and experience. Yet this king can no longer learn from or listen to others. Hence, he loses the wisdom that exalted him and a man much younger takes his place on the throne, and that one comes from debtor's prison. He had everything against him; yet he supplants the king because the king refuses the wisdom he could receive from others. People flock to this man because he is wise. But then, his many followers may turn from him as well, another form of vanity.

Observations about one's relationship with God—Eccl. 5:1-7

The connections between these two sections is not clear. But the relation may have to do with our relationship with God in contrast to those we have with men. Earthly relationships may lead to vanity; but our relationship with God can be meaningful if we appreciate the proper approach to God.

1. What warning did the preacher issue about approaching God in worship? What should have priority in the Lord's presence?

The imagery of this text is taken from the Hebrew worshipper going to the temple. He is urged to approach God with caution. He should take his role as a listener seriously. And he should beware of the dangers of misusing worship. The reference here is to the "zebah" which was a sacrificial offering that was taken as a meal in the presence of the Lord. There was ample room in the festivity for sin. Hence, "the sacrifice of fools".

2. What additional warning is given in v. 2? Of what kinds of things do you think the preacher is speaking? Why does he give this admonition? (v. 2-3)

Here the stress is on reverence for God. He is 'in heaven'. Though we may freely approach him, we should beware of hastiness in what we say, whether through thoughtlessness or anger.

Just as dreams often after a busy day with many activities, so foolish words flow from a heart that does not reflect cautiously upon what is said and pours out words before God.

3. What did the preacher urge one to do who made a vow? (v. 4) What did he say was "better"? (v. 5)

We should take our promises to God seriously. Solomon warns against delay and evasion of what we have promised. Do we think about how much we often promise God in our worship in song?

4. What did he urge one not to do? (v. 6) What situation did he envision developing? What did he think would be the consequence?

Do not seek to avoid the completion of what is promised. Do what you say, lest God become angry and punish you.

5. What was the preachers opinion of “many dreams” and “many words”? (v. 7) What did he consider to be the important thing in relation to God?

Again, the conclusion of this discussion focuses on “respect for God”. In chapter three we learned that it is the purpose of God’s providence to lead us to “fear Him”. Now, the preacher recommends this approach to God as the only way to solicit God’s favor and fellowship in life. And it anticipates “the conclusion of the matter” at the end of the book.