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Interlude: Some Reflections, Maxims and Home Truths
Ecclesiastes 4:9 to 5:12

Interlude: Some reflections, maxims and home truths DIG: Why are two better than one? Why was the old king so unpopular? How does 5:7 summarize the message of pious talk? Of popular acclaim? What is the reason for the oppression in 5:8-9? Why should we not be surprised by this? Why do the three proverbs (5:10, 11, and 12) prove to be pointless?

REFLECT: How can you be a part of a three-stranded cord? When facing poor or evil leadership, when are you most patient? Most prayerful? Most pushy for change? Most "quick with your mouth?" How do you become part of the solution instead of part of the problem? What do you do when you make a hasty promise that you cannot keep?



Having looked at the poverty of the lonely miser, whatever his outward success, we now reflect on something **better** . . . and **better** will be the key word here **(4:9** and **13, 5:1** and **5)**, as it very often is in the value-judgments of the Wisdom writers.

Companionship (4:9-12): Two are better than one, in that their cooperative efforts yield this advantage: if one of them falls, the other will

help his partner up – woe to him who is alone when he falls and has no one to help him up. Again, if two people sleep together, they keep each other warm; but how can one person be warm by himself? The thoughts are simple and direct; they apply to many forms of partnership, not the least (though not explicitly) to marriage. With graceful conciseness they depict the profit, resilience, comfort and strength given to a true partnership; and these are worth the demands it takes to achieve it. Such demands are not clear here, but there would hardly be the need to explain the benefits of partnership if it involved no cost. It's obvious price is the person's independence because once we have a partner/companion we must take into consideration their interests, listen to their opinions, adjust to their pace and style of living, and generally have their back.

Moreover, an attacker may defeat someone who is alone, but two can resist him; and a three-stranded cord is not easily broken. An obvious example of this blessing, and famous among believers, is the strength brought to a marriage, or indeed any human companionship, when **ADONAI** is **the Chief Strand** makes it **a three-stranded cord that is not easily broken.** But perhaps it would be nearer **Solomon's** thought to read this metaphor in purely human terms, so that if it were applied to marriage, **the third strand** would appropriately be the gift of children, with all that adds to the quality and strength of the original tie. Even so, we are probably being more specific than he intended.

Popular acclaim (4:13-16): Better a youth who is poor but wise than a king who is old but foolish, no longer willing to listen to advice. True, he rose from prison to be king; Yet, while ruling, he became poor. I observed that all who live and walk under the sun, cutting **God** out of the picture, **took the side of the youth mentioned first who would rule in place of the king, and that no limit was set for the number of his subjects. Nevertheless, those who come afterwards will not regard him highly. This too is certainly pointless and feeding on wind.** This paragraph describes the short-lived popularity of **the rich** and famous. It shows the faults of both sides, beginning with the stubbornness of the man who has been too long in the saddle – who is out of touch and out of sympathy with the times, forgetting what it was to be young as he once was. There is enough likeness to the earlier and later life of David for us to reflect that the finest of men can go this way and be the last to recognize it. But the portrait is not really designed to be historical.

So it may come to it that a better man **comes after** him, and he is better if he has the right qualities, whatever his lack of years or standing, as **4:13** points out.

Solomon, with his way of bringing the scene vividly before us the teeming mass of men, all on the side of the newcomer, young as he is. Yet, he too will eventually go the way of **the old king**, not necessarily for his faults, but simply because he gets **old** and is no longer interesting. He had reached a pinnacle of human glory, only to be stranded there.

Pious talk (5:1-7): Watch your step when you go to the house of God. Offering to listen is better than fools offering sacrifices, because they don't discern whether or not they are doing evil. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. For God is in heaven, and you are on earth; so let your words be few. For nightmares come from worrying too much; and a fool, when he speaks, chatters too much. If you make a vow to God, don't delay in discharging it. For God takes no pleasure in fools, so discharge your vow! Better not to make a vow than to make a vow and not discharge it. Don't let your words make you guilty, and don't tell the Temple official that you made the vow by mistake. Why give God reason to be angry at what you say and destroy what you have accomplished? For [this is what happens when there are too] many dreams, aimless activities and words. Instead, just fear God!

Continuing with **his** interlude of portraits, **Solomon** turns **his** observant eye on the worshiper. Like the prophets, **he** presses reality in **his** realm; though **his** tone is quiet, **his** words are razor-sharp. Whereas the prophets hurl their criticism against the hypocrites, **the Teacher's** target is the well-meaning person who likes to "play church." But who listens with half an ear, and never quite gets around to do what he has volunteered to do for **God**.

Such a man has forgotten where and who he is; above all, who **ADONAI** is. The repeated use of the word **fool** is scathing, for to be casual with **YHVH** is evil, a sin, and something that will not go unpunished. Lest we think that this is just a piece of limited harshness in the TaNaKh, the B'rit Chadashah is equally as harsh with its warnings against making pious words pointless or treating lightly that which is holy (see the commentary on **First Corinthians, to see file click Cb – The Answer: Honor the Body**). No amount of emphasis on grace can justify taking liberties with **God**, for the very concept of grace demands gratitude, which cannot be casual.

Going back over these verses in more detail, we are reminded by the opening words: **Watch your step,** of the pains **Ha'Shem** took to guard **His** earthly Tabernacle in earlier days, even by the threat of death **(Leviticus 15:31)**. At one

level this makes it clear to us both the cost of our admission to **the heavenly Tabernacle**, and the purity that is demanded of us (see the commentary on **Hebrews Cg – Messiah's Sacrifice Opens the Way to God**), while at another level it brings home to us the regard we should have for the Church of **God**, the Living Temple (see **First Corinthians Av – God's Spirit Lives in God's Temple**).

The word **listen** in **5:1b** has the double force in Hebrew which it sometimes has in English: *to pay attention to and to obey.* So this saying is close to the famous words of Samuel: **to obey (**literally **to listen) is better than sacrifice (First Samuel 15:22).** Here, however, the pointlessness of worship is unwitting; one's sin is that of a **fool** rather than a reprobate, if that is any comfort! **The Teacher** would hardly encourage us to think so. **His** reminder that **Ha'Shem takes no pleasure in fools** is as quietly crushing a remark as any in the book.

Official predators (5:8-9): If you see the poor oppressed, rights violated and justice perverted in the province, don't be surprised; for a high official has one higher watching him, and there are others above them. But the greatest advantage to the country is when the king makes himself a servant to the land.

So, reflections on coping realistically with life continue, with **the Teacher** now turning a watchful eye on bureaucracy. If the picture doesn't claim to be universal, it is still familiar enough. We can see a mass of officials frustrating the citizen who presses for his rights. He is easily obstructed and defeated. As for moral responsibility, it can easily be side-stepped by blaming the system, while ultimate authorities wield their power at a distance far from the lives of the people they affect. Everyone at the top gets a pass no matter what they have done, then whatever justice is left over trickles down to the masses. Small wonder the citizens at the bottom of such a structure found justice hard to come by. True to the viewpoint of the book, the comment on all this is realistic. After all, if we are looking at a world **under the sun**, on its own terms of total secularism, we could not expect too high a moral tone, either from the system in place or any other. **The Teacher** pins no hope on any utopian scheme or revolution. **He** knows the true nature of mankind.

Money (5:10-12): The lover of money never has enough money; the lover of luxury never has enough income. This too is pointless. When the quantity of goods increases, so do those who consume them; so the only advantage to the owner is that he gets to watch them do it. The sleep of a

working man is sweet, whether he eats little or much; but the overfullness of the rich won't let them sleep at all. The subject of **money** is one of the most compelling, as **Yeshua** implied when **He** warned us against making **it** a second god (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Dr – Store Up Treasures in Heaven, Where Thieves Do Not Break in and Steal**). The three sayings above show **money** for what **it** is, by pointing out the craving **it** creates, **the parasites it** attracts, and the suffering which is **its** typical reward.

Verse 10 is a little classic on **the love of money**, a fitting companion to the famous saying in **First Timothy 6:9, "Those whose goal is to be rich fall into temptation; they get trapped in many foolish and hurtful ambitions which plunge them into ruin and destruction."** Here the interest is psychological, though the final remark: **This too is pointless,** drives home the ultimate lesson to be learned from it. The unappeased craving **it** creates is very obvious in the gambler, the tycoon, and the well paid businessman who never has enough – for **the love of money** grows by what **it** feeds on. But it may also show itself more subtly in a general discontent: a longing not necessarily for more **money** but for inward fulfillment. If anything is worse than the addiction **money** brings, it is the emptiness **it** leaves. Mankind, with eternity in his **heart**, needs better nourishment.[284]

So what good is wealth – except perhaps to watch it slip through your fingers (Ecclesiastes 5:11 NLT)! The first half of **verse 11** offers yet another proverb about the problems associated with **wealth** and perhaps gives us a reason why no one finds satisfaction in **it**. As one's means increase, so do the "bills." Whether **those who consume them** are creditors or extended family members, it makes no difference to the point of the verse. The second half of the verse draws out the implication of the first. The one who has the **money** seldom has the opportunity to really enjoy **its** fruits. The **wealth** that is pursued takes on a life of its own and starts to control the person pursuing it. All the owner can do is stand and watch as his problems gather momentum.[285]

In **verse 12** we now read the third reason in as many verses why **money** is more of a problem than a blessing. **The rich** cannot **sleep** well because **they** overindulge **themselves** to the extreme and worry about losing **their money**. This is what happens when affluence and indulgence join hands. The irony is that **the working man sleeps** soundly even though his stomach is not as full.

Have you turned away from the weariness of **money** and every other good thing to

find your **joy** in **God**? Anyone who doesn't have **joy** in life must be looking in the wrong place. The way to find joy is to pray, "**Lord, You** know how empty I feel right now. Help me turn away from all the things I am using to fill the empty spaces in my life and fill me with your grace instead." **Solomon** teaches us to depend on **God's** many gifts. This is part of **his** answer to the problem of life's **pointlessness**. The person who learns this lesson will **seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with joy in his heart (5:20).** When we learn to take pleasure in **ADONAI** we experience so much **joy** that **life's** short **pointless** troubles are all but forgotten.[286]