

# 5

## *Ecclesiastes 5: 1-5*

### *Going to the House of the LORD*

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Text: Ecclesiastes 5: 1-5.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 5

Psalm 122: 1, 2.

Psalm 122: 3.

Palm 24: 1, 2, 3.

Psalm 51:6.

Psalm 32: 1, 2, 4, 5.

#### **Theme and points:**

*In this life under the sun, it is of key importance to go to the house of the LORD. We will note three aspects:*

- 1) how we should go to the house of the LORD*
- 2) what we should do in the house of the LORD*
- 3) how we should go from the house of the LORD*

# *Ecclesiastes 5: 1-5*

## *Going to the House of the LORD*

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven, and you are on earth so let your words be few. As a dream comes when there are many cares, so the speech of a fool when there are many words. When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it.*

Following the book of Ecclesiastes in broad lines, we come now to chapter 5, where the house of God is mentioned for the first time. I want to note that very emphatically. Much has already been done and said by the Preacher, and he has undertaken many projects, but in all this, he has never yet once mentioned the house of God.

Should this not have come *first*? Are we not to start always with the Lord and his service? “Seek ye first...” The first passage (1:1) should perhaps have read: “All is meaningless, *except* going to the house of God.” For it is there, in the house of God, that we find our reason for being, is it not?

I had to think of Psalm 73, of Asaph, who also feels that life is cumbersome and unfair. He, too, wonders about the sense of serving God, and uses the word “vanity”, but then admits, “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me, till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” (Ps 73: 16-17) Asaph found his answer in the house of God. It is the central passage in the whole Psalm. But the Preacher has not mentioned the house of God until now, five chapters into the book.

### **Negative terms?**

And when he finally does mention the house of God, it seems to be in negative terms: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God...” Watch out what you say and do there. Do not say too much, because God holds you to every word. Back off.

What kind of talk is this? Does the man really *love* the service of the LORD? Does he rejoice in this service or is he reserved about it? Whatever happened to Psalm 122: 1, where we sing “How glad I was when unto me they said, ‘Let us with one accord, go to the temple of the LORD?’” Perhaps we would have said: “Reverend Preacher, the church, the LORD, and the worship of God should be much more in the centre than they are in this book of Ecclesiastes.”

Well, chapter 5 *is* in many ways the centre of the book. I cannot go into all the important aspects of this statement, but the Preacher now mentions the house of God because that is where the *heart* of God’s people lies. He had to come to this point, and now he does. And what concerns him most, in keeping with the theme of his book, is precisely that many abuse the house of the LORD and therefore are not properly comforted and guided. Then worship, too, becomes vanity or meaninglessness.

I summarize the text as follows:

*In this life under the sun, it is of key importance to go the house of the LORD. We will note three aspects:*

- 1) *how we should go to the house of the LORD*
- 2) *what we should do in the house of the LORD*
- 3) *how we should go from the house of the LORD*

### **Guard your steps?**

Is it not a curious expression: “*Guard your steps* when you go to the house of the LORD?” What does it mean to guard your steps? In a physical sense, the expression means to be careful when you walk. But we all understand that this is not what the Preacher means. His words must be taken here in a spiritual sense: make sure that when you go to the house of the LORD, you have the right *attitude*.

One explainer does point to the fact that those entering the temple had to take off their shoes because they were treading on holy ground, as Moses once did at the burning bush (Ex 3:5). So there might be a play on words here. Be that as it may, we still agree that a spiritual matter is meant here. We must have the proper attitude.

What could be wrong with someone’s attitude when going to the temple? It is not without reason that the Preacher uses the expression, “the house of the LORD.” That is what the temple was. It was the place where God dwelt in the midst of his people. In many ways it was just a building, although the temple of Solomon was an edifice of unparalleled architectural beauty, but in one way it was different: it was the place where God lived in the middle of his people.

Therefore the temple could be rightly called a “sanctuary”, and this applied particularly to the holy area and the holy of holies, the most holy area. The people could not just go into this temple as if they were entering any other public building because in this building they came to stand before God. Even though there was still a separation by special curtains, it was the house of God, the sanctuary, where God himself dwelt on the ark between the cherubim.

### ***Standing before God***

Did the people realize that when they went to the house of the LORD they came to stand before God himself? This required then an attitude of deep reverence, a very keen sense of piety that they were now standing on holy ground. Whoever went to stand in the temple with the wrong attitude, in a flippant sense, without great reverence and humility, actually endangered himself.

Was there really danger? I do not think that the Preacher means danger in an immediate physical sense. God did not strike down with fire all irreverent worshippers. He did so with Nadab and Abihu at the tabernacle, but that was a very specific situation (Lev 10). The damage that could be done was spiritual. One could go to the house of the LORD, but it was nothing special, and because he was not open to the majesty and immensity of the privilege of being in God’s house, he could come to despise God’s grace.

### ***Despising God’s grace***

That is where the rubber really hits the road. People go to God’s house but have no regard for the grace of God by which they are redeemed and must be renewed. They treat carelessly the only thing that really has true meaning: God’s grace and mercy. In the end they commit spiritual suicide.

We will see in a moment how this despising of God’s grace became concretely visible, but let me ask now: how do you go to the house of the LORD? We are faced with a different situation than the Israelites. We have no temple, and God is in heaven. As such there is no earthly holy place where we must tread carefully.

### ***Sanctuary or auditorium?***

We do not call the church a “sanctuary”. I know that some refer to the auditorium as the sanctuary, but that is based on Roman Catholic or Anglican word usage. That, in turn, is based on a theological error: if Christ is physically present in the building in bread and wine through transub-

stantiation, then indeed it has become a sanctuary. But that is not the case. The sanctuary is in heaven, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

To use the word “sanctuary”, then, would mean to perpetuate a fallacy and so we speak instead of a building and an *auditorium*. We come to *hear* God’s word. A hearer is an *auditor*. The place of hearing is called an *auditorium*. This is not a matter of semantics but of biblical accuracy.

Sometimes we hear the word “nave” that comes from the Greek word for ship (actually the hull of a ship) and refers to the middle part of a church building, the long main hall of a church that is built in the form of a cross. Instead of using the word “sanctuary”, some prefer the word “nave”. That word is probably architecturally correct and theologically innocent. Many modern church buildings, however, are not built in the form of a cross, and so the word “nave” does not really fit, either. The word “auditorium” is still most exact and fitting to describe the place and the activity of worship.

### ***The house of the LORD***

Yet we also call the church still today “the house of the LORD”. Why do we do this? Because that is where we meet to worship, to hear the Word of God, and to respond in prayer and praise. So the church building has special meaning for us because of its function and usage, not in the same way as in the Old Testament, but in a New Testament way.

The worship service is a very special gathering, and then the Preacher’s warning to guard your steps still applies. How do you come to church, and what is your attitude? Is it just a formal thing, or it is central to your life, and do all things for the entire week begin there or not? Do you gather with a proper esteem for God’s grace in Christ? If you come empty, you leave empty. If you come in faith, you will be strengthened. If you come with criticism, you will leave with more. Come on your knees, and you may walk out upright.

What do we do in church? “Go near to listen, rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools, who do not know that they do wrong.” (5:1) This is textually a very difficult passage, translated in many different ways, but I think the NIV has properly caught the main drift.

### ***The sacrifice of fools***

What is the sacrifice of fools? A fool in the wisdom literature is always someone who will not listen to God, who goes his own way and is not sensitive to God’s Word. A fool basically despises God’s grace and spurns his instruction. In fact, a fool lives as if there is no God. He may think he is

very smart, but the Bible calls unbelievers “fools”. Literally the word means those who lie to themselves. They may think they are quite religious, but in fact they are not; they are fools, self-deceivers.

The sacrifice of fools is a sacrifice that is brought only formally, without faith, without true confession of sin, and without any eye for God’s grace. The fool brings a sacrifice and thinks, “Well, I’ve done my duty again; this should cover me for another week. You can’t touch me, God, because I sacrificed to you. You can’t touch me”. Fools like to give, sometimes, but do not like to *listen*.

### ***Listening is doing***

Go near to listen, the Preacher says. Some explainers say that this is not a proper rendering because there was no instruction being given at the temple. But listening also has something to do with *obeying*. When your mom or dad says, “Listen to what I say”, they mean, “Obey, *do* what I say!” You can bring a sacrifice to God, but if you are not prepared to listen to his Word, what is the sense of the sacrifice? What did the prophet Samuel say to King Saul? He said that obedience is better than sacrifice (1 Sam 13 and 15: 22-23).

Our text says that these fools do not *know* that they do wrong. I guess this is another difficult expression. You can take it to mean that a fool never learns. But in the wisdom literature about the fool, there is this notion: you cannot separate a fool from his foolishness. “Though you grind a fool in a mortar, grinding him like grain with a pestle, you will not remove his folly from him” (Prov 27: 22). He does not know (or is beyond knowing) how foolish he is. These fools time and again bring sacrifices and if you tell them that their life does not agree with their sacrifice, they have no clue. Our Lord Jesus said to the Pharisees, “God demands mercy, not sacrifice”(Matt 9: 13) but they simply had no idea what He meant, even though He quoted from the prophets (Hos 6:6).

The sacrifice of fools is that they give something, but not themselves. The LORD, however, cannot be bought or paid off. He is not satisfied with sacrifices. “One gift alone is pleasing in his sight, the contrite heart of one who has repented” (Ps 51, *Book of Praise*).

The Preacher then goes on to speak about our words and vows before God in his house and how we should go from the house of the LORD determined to keep our vows.

## ***Christ and the house of God***

Let me conclude this section with this thought: when you want to see the importance of going to the house of the LORD, you have to consider the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every Sabbath, He went to the synagogue. Every year, He went up to the temple, to the great feasts. He came before God with reverence and fear, even though He is the Son of God. He never made one vow He did not fulfill.

He gave the greatest sacrifice, laying down for us his own life. But the Jews said He was a fool and they mocked him for it. They cast him out of the temple, out of the Holy City, and crucified him outside the city on Golgotha. They considered the cross to be foolishness.

Let us then draw near to listen to the gospel of grace and new life, and go to live accordingly. Let us stand in awe of God's majesty and mercy every Sunday again. Let us come with an open heart to give ourselves fully to the service of the LORD.

In our vain life under the sun, the only thing that makes eternal sense is what we hear in the house of the LORD. Those who cut out the Gospel from their lives and close their hearts to God are fools. Those who come faithfully but will not listen are also fools. Let us come faithfully and always bring the sacrifice of praise for the great love shown to us in Jesus Christ, our Savior.

AMEN.