

## **Taking God Seriously Outside the House of God**

Ecclesiastes 5:8-9; Habakkuk 3:17-19

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The fear of the Lord is not only the beginning of wisdom (as Solomon states in Proverbs 9:10), but it is also the beginning of a lasting joy, peace, and happiness as well. I dare say until we fear God and take Him so seriously that we see Him alone as the fount of every blessing (including joy), we will keep trying to draw water out of dry wells in our life (whether those dry wells be money, jobs, homes, sports, sex, education, fame, fun, family, or friends). The one and only source of everlasting joy is He who never perishes; He who never changes; He who can never be overcome or defeated. The Lord wants us to enjoy all that He has made and given to us, but we must understand that He alone is the fountain of joy, peace, and contentment that satisfies now and forevermore. Even the various aspects of worship must be viewed as wells rather than the water itself (whether it is the reading and preaching of God's Word, the singing of Psalms, Prayer, Baptism, the Lord's Supper, or Vows). Solomon even makes it clear that we will bring our vain and empty attempts to find the joy of the Lord into the very House of God if we do not recognize Him as the living water that brings joy, and the various parts of worship as the well from which we draw that water.

Dear ones, one of the ways in which you rob yourself of the joy of the Lord is to treat God in a frivolous condescending manner. To have water at your finger tips anytime you want, it can make water itself something very common and ordinary. You have so much of it that you forget its significance to your very existence. You have so much of it that you seldom give thanks for it (in a very specific way). You have so much of it that you even waste it. However, those who have gone without water for days will likely treat water as something very special. Water will be to them among their most precious gifts and blessings. For without it, there is no life. Without it, all the money in the world is irrelevant. If that is true of water, it is infinitely more true of the one true living God, who gives and sustains both physical life and spiritual life. He created the water and gives us not only life, but every other blessing (whether physical or spiritual) that we enjoy now and for all eternity. He is the Most High God and not a buddy to whom we occasionally talk in order to salve our guilty conscience, nor a heavenly Santa Claus at whom we merely throw our wishes.

Like water, you and I treat our great God and Savior as if He were common and ordinary. We even forget Him in times of blessing (enjoying the blessing more than we enjoy the one who has given us the blessing). Like the nine lepers that were healed by the Lord Jesus, we run away to enjoy our blessing, but forget Him who has freely and graciously given us that blessing to enjoy, so that we might enjoy Him more and more. When you forget the Most High God, you act as though He doesn't even exist. When you do that which is evil in private (but would never do it in public), you act as though God cannot see you. When you are overcome with worry and fear, you act as though God was a weakling like yourself. When you continue in your sin without repentance, you act as though God was not a holy and just God before whom you will all stand on that final day to give an account.

Dear ones, when you treat God as common and ordinary, you do not fear Him. You do not reverence Him. You do not take Him seriously. A God whom you do not take seriously must be a very small God in your eyes. And there is little or no joy in serving a little God (or at least one whom you treat as little and insignificant in your lives). However, there is great joy in serving a great God. How big is your God? To the degree that the one true living God is great and awesome in your eyes (one to be feared and taken seriously), to that degree you will know the everlasting joy that comes only from Him.

Solomon has emphasized for us the importance of fearing God and taking Him seriously when you approach Him in worship (Ecclesiastes 5:1-7), but now that same fear of God is to be carried out of the House of God and into the many trials and tribulations that you face in this life. Solomon declares that God is to be feared from our text this Lord's Day because (1) The Lord Is Higher Than All (Ecclesiastes 5:8); and (2) The Lord Provides for All (Ecclesiastes 5:9).

#### **I. The Lord Is Higher Than All (Ecclesiastes 5:8).**

A. There may seem to be no connection between what Solomon has said about our approach to God in worship (in Ecclesiastes 5:1-7) and the oppression we find when we leave the House of God (in Ecclesiastes 5:8-9). But there is a connection and it is this: "but fear thou God" (Ecclesiastes 5:7). For the way in which you approach God in worship is also the way you are to approach God in oppression, trials, afflictions, and tribulation. You are to fear God, whether you are in His House, or outside His House. You must take the Most High God seriously, whether you bring Him your sacrifices, or whether you suffer the injustice of others. Showing reverence for Almighty God is a grace with which you are to be adorned at all times, regardless of where you are or regardless of what you are doing. The fear of the Lord is never inappropriate at any event or on any occasion.

B. Solomon says in effect that if you find the joy of the Lord in the House of God because you have approached Him with all due reverence and honor, be careful that that you do not forget the great and mighty God you have just worshipped when you leave the House of God and see the oppression and injustice in the world that comes from those who have the power to rule. The Lord is not confined to the House of God or to the people of God when they gather to worship. At the dedication of the Temple, Solomon made this clear when he prayed with these awe-inspiring words: "But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built" (2 Chronicles 6:18). Yes, the Lord meets with you, teaches you, corrects you, encourages you, and walks in your midst in a very special way when you gather each Lord's Day to worship Him. You come to offer to the Lord your God (who alone is worthy) the sacrifices of your worship and praise. You bring the sacrifices of your hands in the form of your financial offerings, the sacrifices of your lips in the Psalms and prayers you offer, and the sacrifices of your hearts as you are broken at seeing the glory of God's holiness and justice and yet the glory of His love and grace toward undeserving sinners. But you must not leave the fear of your great God at the place of worship. You must take that awe and wonder of the God, who is absolutely sovereign over all His creation, with you to your homes, to your workplaces, to your schools, and to your world. To leave God at the place of worship would be to treat Him as if He were bound by the walls of this building. Solomon stated in his prayer that even the heaven of heavens were not great and immense enough to contain our God, how much less a mere building.

C. The question that confronts Solomon at this point is how do you take the joy of the Lord from the place of worship into a world of trial, tribulation, injustice, and suffering? The answer: you take the joy of the Lord with you by fearing God, by seeing His greatness and power even in the face of oppression and injustice. For if you forget the God you have just worshipped with all due reverence, and if you act as though He does not rule over all and as though the trials you suffer He does not see, you have left the fear of God in the House of God. How many times do you leave the House of God filled with a holy reverence for God's greatness and then face opposition at work for your faith, or face a physical affliction in your bodies, or face a financial burden, and forget your great God and Savior, Jesus Christ?

D. Solomon says that when you see or experience the verbal attacks of others and the perversion

of justice in which the wicked are exalted and the righteous are abased, “marvel not at the matter” (Ecclesiastes 5:8). Don’t be astonished or dumbfounded when you see the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer at their hands. Don’t be amazed when the ungodly who rule crush the lives of the poor and needy under their feet. Literally, Solomon states, “Marvel not at the purpose or will.” Marvel not at the evil purposes of the wicked who despise you and hate the truth for which you stand (1 Peter 4:12). Suffering for Christ (who loved you and suffered for you the humiliation of man and the wrath of God) is the greatest honor you will ever have in this life. Only as you view your suffering as an honor (as a public commendation) bestowed upon you by your Captain, the Lord Jesus Christ, will you be able to rejoice when you are slandered, misrepresented, or isolated for the truth. Don’t become bitter and resentful. Don’t feel sorry for yourselves. Don’t take vengeance against those who speak evil of you. Don’t cower and tremble in fear before your adversaries. Don’t forget your great and mighty God is in charge here, not those who sit in places of power. Fear the Lord, not those who oppress you. See the honor God intends, rather than the dishonor your adversary intends. Forget not that if those who are oppressed are to fear God and take Him seriously, so are those who oppress others to fear God and take Him seriously. For He will avenge the righteous and take up the cause of those who are unjustly oppressed. The fear of the Lord is a flashing neon light to all, warning you to be just, fair, and charitable in all your dealings with one another.

E. Solomon gives you a couple reasons why you are not to be shocked and surprised when you suffer injustice at the hands or lips of others.

1. The first reason why you are not to marvel is because the Most High God sees and knows what you are enduring from others (“For he that is higher than the highest regardeth” Ecclesiastes 5:8). The Most High God is infinitely higher in power and might than the highest among men. The highest and most powerful among men is like a puny ant or a grasshopper under the foot of our God (Isaiah 40:21-26). Satan himself is like a dog on a leash—he can only go as far as the Lord permits him to go (as we see in the cases of Job and Peter, wherein Satan had to obtain permission from the Most High God before bringing trials into their lives—Job 1:12; Job 2:6; Luke 22:31-32). I use to have a friend in college who was a fellow basketball player. I felt pretty safe whenever he was around. After all he was 6 feet 10 inches tall and about 300 pounds. He was very protective. He came to my defense on more than one occasion. Now how foolish I was to have felt safe in the presence of this friend when facing adversaries, but not to feel safe in the presence of the Almighty God when facing adversaries. Let the mightiest of adversaries be brought against you, dear ones (whether poverty, unemployment, persecution for the Cause of Christ, slander against your reputation, exaltation of your enemies over you, isolation from family and friends for the sake of Christ’s truth, chronic illnesses or diseases, and even death itself); none of these, absolutely none is higher, mightier, or greater than the Most High God (Daniel 4:34,35,37). This Most High God regards, considers, and watches with infinite love your every step. No adversary can lay a finger on you, not one hair in your hair can be destroyed, or one word uttered against you without His having ordained it. Therefore, what have you to fear from your adversary, if you fear and take seriously the Most High God (Psalm 27:1-3)? The fear of God brings the joy of the Lord in knowing all is safe, for God is on watch (and He never slumbers nor sleeps).

2. The second reason why you are not to marvel when you see or experience the oppression of adversaries is because “there be higher than they” (Ecclesiastes 5:8). Now this may simply be a phrase that further emphasizes what Solomon has just said concerning God under the first reason. If that is the case, there is only one reason stated here by Solomon in verse 8. However, many commentators see a second reason why you are not to be dismayed and utterly confounded by the oppression of your adversaries: the Lord employs His mighty angels to do His bidding, and these are also higher than all your adversaries. Angels, dear ones, are not fairy tale characters that are fictional or mythological. They are the holy servants of the Lord who are endowed with His power and might to overcome the mightiest of nations and rulers on

earth. If these mighty angels can destroy 185,000 soldiers in one night from one of the most feared nations of the ancient world (Assyria) as was done in Isaiah 37:26, or are able to surround the mighty army of the Syrians with innumerable chariots of fire as was done in 2 Kings 6:17, or are able to rescue Peter who was chained in a prison cell, then these same mighty angels are able to deliver you, to defend you, to aid you against your adversaries (whatever or whoever they may be). For these mighty beings are “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister FOR THEM who shall be heirs of salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). Even the most helpless of God’s children have their ministering angels according to Matthew 18:10. Would you feel like you could face those adversaries who oppress you if you could see God’s mighty angels filling the room? They are present with you wherever you go. In fact, you have most likely been preserved and protected from so many dangers in your life because of those very angels that God has sent to minister to you, His elect. Now will not such a fear and reverence for God instill within you a joy and peace that no man can take away?

## **II. The Lord Provides for All (Ecclesiastes 5:9).**

A. We come now to briefly consider the second reason why God is to be feared when we leave the House of God and face the many trials, tribulations, and afflictions of our adversaries. Solomon says, “Moreover the profit [or increase] of the earth is for all.” In other words, God causes the earth to provide for the needs of all men. No one on this earth is so great that he is not dependent upon the increase and blessings which God supplies (Psalm 104:13-15). And in order to show just how dependent all men are upon God for His increase, God sends famines, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, floods, fires, wars, pestilence, and economic collapse, so that man from the least to the greatest may have a testimony and record of their own insufficiency and inadequacy to care for themselves, to protect themselves, and to provide for themselves. You see, man’s inability to protect himself from such danger and devastation ought to reveal to you your inability to provide the increase that you need to live and to survive. For God gives and takes away the increase of a land (as we see in the seven years of plenty in Egypt and then the seven years of famine, Genesis 41). And dear ones, just as God supplies the increase of the land for all (indiscriminately, whether rich or poor, whether young or old, whether Jew or Gentile, whether male or female, whether religious or heathen), so likewise, God offers the gospel of salvation (which is the greatest increase or blessing that God may give) to all. None are excluded due to their circumstances. All who hear my voice are invited to come to Jesus Christ and to receive the water of everlasting life. God is even to be feared and taken seriously in hearing the gospel of Christ, for it is a serious invitation from Christ. No one will come to Christ who does not take Him seriously. And all who ignore or despise Him and His free offer must likewise hear that He will not be mocked. We cannot spurn such offers of love and yet escape His holy anger.

B. Solomon speaks here of even the highest and mightiest in the land, “the King himself is served by the field” (Ecclesiastes 5:9). Whether the most powerful in the world will admit and confess it, they just like the poor and the needy are dependent upon the increase that God brings to the field, or to the land, or to the financial institutions. And yet every election year we hear the same boasting and pride wherein the civil rulers glory in their own achievements and policies in bringing about an increase in our land. What arrogant and foolish pride! We identify with the Psalmist in Psalm 73:2-5 at the prosperity and might of the wicked. But the Lord says that He sets these haughty rulers and most powerful of men in slippery places, so that all may see their downfall (Psalm 73:16-19).

C. Here again, it is the fear of God in taking Him seriously and in seeing His greatness that issues forth in the joy of the Lord. When you lack or when you are in need, the same God that provides for the wealthy is the God who will certainly provide for His own poor and needy people who trust in Him, love Him, and obey Him (Habakkuk 3:17-19). Dear ones, only in the fear of the Most High God can you find the joy of the

Lord that will satisfy your inward thirst. When you find yourselves in the heat of a severe trial, in the cross-hairs of a strong adversary, in the pain of an ongoing affliction, or in the confusion of making sense out of what is happening in your life, it is at those very times, dear ones, that you see how great or how small God is in your judgment, how seriously or how casually you take the Lord your God. Is your God one to be feared and taken seriously in all such trials and tribulations and in all times of blessing and prosperity? Is He a midget or a giant in your eyes? Is He one to be forgotten, or one to be remembered? Is He one who is nervously waiting to see how all this is going to work out, or one who powerfully, righteously, and wisely ordains everything for His glory and for the good of those who trust Him, love Him, and obey Him? How big is your God? Dear ones, you can tell how big the Lord is in your mind by how seriously you take His commandments and your duty to obey them, how seriously you take His promises and your duty to trust them, and how seriously you take His sovereign control over your life and your duty to submit to it. Amen.

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