



# THE PRAYER CLOSET

Encouraging & Equipping Believers in Prayer

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ISSUE 1

## True Worship In A Meaningless World

Solomon begins Ecclesiastes with these penetrating words, "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity (1:2). According to him, without God, everything is meaningless. Throughout this book, he says that people are chasing after the wind. They live their lives in pursuit of what does not ultimately matter.

In **Ecclesiastes 5**, Solomon deals with true worship. Why would he deal with worship in a book about the meaningless of life without God? It is because worship that is not focused on God is empty and meaningless. Worship that does not have God as its focus is chasing after the wind.

The short film *James 3* shows a family getting ready for church. There is no sound in the movie but it's not hard to read the lips or the attitudes of the family, as they get ready for church. They wake up grumpy and sleepy. The dad stumbles over laundry, kicking it out of the way. The older daughter and mother argue about what she will wear to church. The younger daughter spills her milk and cereal. As they are going to church, angry words are exchanged as the dad slams on the brakes while the mother is putting her lipstick on.

As the family gets ready for church, no one smiles. Not a friendly word is exchanged. Yet, when they walk into the church, the mom and dad smile at the first people they meet. They are joyful as they take their seats. When

they stand to sing, they close their eyes in reverent adoration. As the film ends, the sound begins, and we can hear what they are singing, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

How much of that film is fantasy? How much of it is reality? In **Ecclesiastes 5**, Solomon speaks to those who attend the house of God, who go to church. Even with all the frustration that Solomon exhibits in Ecclesiastes, he not only believed in God but also was also fully committed to worship. He teaches us about how to worship God. Our great need in a world of meaninglessness and pointlessness, we must know how to worship the true God. We must worship God and not that which is meaningless and useless. If we want to keep from being sucked into chasing after the wind, we must worship our God. Worship delivers us from the world's meaninglessness and hopelessness.

What lessons does Solomon teach us about true worship?

### Listen up! (Ecclesiastes 5:1)

Solomon begins by dealing with the way that we approach God. He tells us to pay attention to God's Word, "Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more

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ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil” (5:1). The picture presented is that of a worshiper walking into the house of God. Solomon was thinking of a person going into the temple at Jerusalem. Yet, it applies to any place set aside for the worship of God.

As we go to worship. Solomon tells us to watch our step. There is a right way and a wrong way to enter the house of God. The right way to approach God is to come and worship with our ears wide open. What are we to listen to? It is the Word of God. The house of God is the place for the reading and the preaching of God’s Word.

The first questions we need to ask ourselves concerning worship are:

Am I ready to listen to the voice of God?  
Is my heart open to spiritual instruction?  
Are my ears attentive to the message I will hear from God’s Word?

The trouble for most of us is that it is hard to listen. We have so many other voices competing for our attention. Even when we enter a quiet place to worship, the noise of the surrounding culture is still ringing in our ears. It seems easier to let our thoughts wander than to work hard at listening to God’s voice. We often go through the motions of worship without having our minds engaged.

Solomon exhorts us to listen. He uses harsh language, “be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools.” He declares that those who do not listen are not offering a sacrifice of praise but the sacrifice of fools. Worship becomes sin if we are not seeking to hear and obey God. It’s not just foolish; it’s evil.

We must understand that whenever we come to worship, we enter the presence of the holy God. We are gathered as His holy people in order to hear His holy Word. If we take this for granted, then the Bible says that we are committing a great evil. God calls us to listen when we come to worship.

It is our privilege to worship God the way that He wants to be worshiped. Through Christ, we are forgiven and accepted. We do

not worship to make ourselves acceptable to God. However, we worship because He has accepted us and made us His children. He desires that we hear His Word with the expectancy of Mary, who sat at her Master’s feet, hanging on every word (Luke 10:38-39). We are to watch our step when we enter the church, ready to pay attention to God and to hear Him.

God calls us to listen when we come to worship. He desires us to listen in three ways:

Listen with confidence – The Bible is His Word; God speaks through His Word.

Listen with expectation – Expect that God has a word for you. Expect Him to speak to where you are and to your personal need.

Listen with faith – Accept His Word as His Word, ready to hear and practice the truth.

### **Watch what you say! (Ecclesiastes 5:2-3)**

Solomon is not only concerned with how we listen but also with how we speak. His first exhortation about worship is “Listen up!” Now, He tells us “Watch what you say!”

People often tend to be rash with their words. They tell lies, make rude comments, and lash out in anger. They utter murderous threats and use ugly racial slurs. They make promises they will never keep. They even swear against God.

Every time a mouth is open, a heart is on display. Whenever we speak, we are showing what is in our hearts. We are as likely to hear a word from hell as a word from heaven. Of all our rash words, Solomon is most concerned about those we speak in the house of God.

**Ecclesiastes 5:2** says, “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter anything before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.” There is a sense in which God hears all the words that we speak. God is always listening and hears everything.

Yet, in **Ecclesiastes 5:2**, he refers specifically to those that we speak in public

worship. Notice the phrase “before God” in **5:2**. He focuses on those words that we speak before God in the place of worship. Solomon wants us to be careful about what we say in worship. He exhorts us to be careful about what we pray, what we sing, what we preach, and what we say to others in worship.

We must ask ourselves:

Do I really mean it when I am singing in church?

Am I really praying to God when I pray?

Are my words sincere that I speak to others in worship?

It’s easy to go through the motions without meaning what we say. Sometimes even a prayer can be prayerless, a hymn meaningless, or encouragement pointless if we do not mean the words. Simply repeating pious words does not mean that our words come from a sincere heart.

The God we worship is the sovereign and mighty God who rules the universe. Solomon declares, “for God is in heaven, and thou upon the earth.” This is one of the best verses in the Bible for putting us in our place. God is in heaven. He is the eternal God who made the entire universe. We are on earth. We are mortal beings, limited in time and space.

This has implication for our worship. We need to know our place. We must remember who God is and who we are. At the same time, we must remember that God knows and sees. He is in heaven, hearing and seeing all. He knows and sees whether our words are sincere or not. We must be careful about what we say in worship.

In **5:3**, Solomon makes a comparison. He says, “For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitudes of words.” If you work hard during the day, you are likely to have strange dreams at night. The harder you work, the stranger the dreams. There is a natural connection.

In the same way, there is a close connection between foolishness and many words. The more talking we do, the more likely we are to say something foolish, especially in

worship. Solomon later says, “A fool also is full or words” (**Ecclesiastes 10:14**). Many words often equates with much foolishness. Solomon is warning us to be careful about what we say, especially in worship.

The real issue is, “Are our words sincere?” We must ask ourselves, “Are my words from the heart?” Sincerity is especially important when we worship. When we sing a hymn of praise, it should be with thoughts of God in our minds and love of God in our hearts. When we pray, it must be directed at God. Our words of blessing and encouragement must flow from the heart, with the desire to build up others. It must not be an insincere form of flattery.

This truth leads us to some practical applications:

- *We must prepare for worship.*  
Sincerity in worship flows out of preparation for worship. We must take the time to prepare for worship. Plead with God to help you get ready for worship. Ask Him to enable you to offer sincere worship.
- *We must turn to Jesus Christ, the Man with perfect speech.*  
Jesus Christ always spoke true words. Jesus never made a rash comment. Jesus never spoke an insincere word. He never spoke words in unrighteous anger. Through His life until His death on the Cross, Jesus carefully chose the words He spoke. Now, this Savior of perfect speech can touch our lips with His grace. He can enable us to speak words that are pleasing to the Father. Cry out to Jesus; seek Him. By His Spirit, He will empower you to speak words that glorify God. Pray that He will enable you to speak sincere words, especially in worship.

## **Do what you say! (Ecclesiastes 5:4-6)**

After telling us to listen up and to watch what we say, He now tells us to do what we say. Again, in this passage, he refers to those things that we say before God in worship.

Solomon says, “When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed” (**5:4**). A vow is a holy promise to God. It is a vow to give something to God or to make a sacrifice to God.

In Biblical times, people often made vows in the context of public worship.

“Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving and perform your vows to the Most High” (**Psalms 50:14**).

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed” (**Psalms 65:1**).

Hannah vowed to dedicate her firstborn son at the place to worship before a priest of the Lord (**1 Samuel 1**). Jephthah made a rash vow that cost him his daughter (**Judges 11:29-40**).

In **Ecclesiastes 5:4**, Solomon’s point is simple. If you make a promise to God, then keep that promise. Honor your promises to God.

It is much easier to make a promise than to keep it. People do this all the time with God, especially when they are bargaining with God in prayer. People say:

“Forgive me this one time, I swear I won’t do it again.”

“As soon as I get more money, then I’ll start giving.”

Unfortunately, we have all made promises like this. Moreover, even more unfortunate, we have not kept these promises. In this case, it would have been better to have never made the promise at all, “Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay” (**Ecclesiastes 5:5**).

In this verse, Solomon is saying that we should not play games with God. If you promise Him something, be a man or woman of your word and do it. If you make a commitment to Him, then carry out that commitment.

Solomon says in **Ecclesiastes 5:6**, “Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error; wherefore should God be angry at thy

voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?” There are many ways that our mouths can lead us into sin. In **5:6**, Solomon refers to the great sin of failing to keep the promises made to God.

People usually try to make excuses for their sin. Solomon says, “neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error.” The “angel” referred to here could be an angelic being. Yet, it could refer to a messenger. During this time, someone from the temple would come around to collect the offerings and sacrifices that people had vowed to pay. There were people who would come around and check up on people who had vowed and had not paid. When the messenger would come, the person would try to get out of it by making a lame excuse, “Vow? What vow? I never made any vow!”

When we fail to do what we say, especially what we promise to God, the Bible says we are guilty of sin. It angers God when we fail to keep our commitments to Him. We face His chastisement. It is a sober and serious thing to make a promise to God.

This text should drive us to cast ourselves on the mercy of God. It should lead us to pray for His forgiveness and ask for the grace to follow through on our commitments. Jesus Christ is the only One who has ever kept all His promises – all His commitments – to God. He kept His holy vow to make a sacrifice – the sacrifice of His body for our sins.

By the mercy of Jesus, we are forgiven of all our failures. By the grace of Jesus, we have help in keeping our commitments to God. We are to pray in Jesus’ name, asking for help to honor all our promises and commitments to God. We come in the name of the Savior who knows what it means to keep a commitment, who did everything He promised to the very death.

## **Focus On God!** (**Ecclesiastes 5:7**)

True worship involves the heart. Solomon closes his exhortation to true worship by describing the heart attitude that we ought to bring to everything we say and do in

worship. He writes, “For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God” (**Ecclesiastes 5:7**).

The “multitudes of dreams” refers to idle daydreaming in the midst of worship. The “many words” are foolish, insincere words spoken in worship. These things are “vanity.” They are useless, meaningless, and pointless. These things are the exact opposite of true worship. What then is true worship? Solomon says, “but fear thou God.”

The fear of God is the goal of life (**Ecclesiastes 12:13**). Yet, it is also the key to true worship. What is the fear of God? It is the realization that the sovereign, majestic, holy God is present. It is the conviction that God is here. I am always in His presence. I never escape His presence for a moment. It is recognizing His greatness and presence and then living daily in the light of this.

What will we do in worship when we fear God? Our worship will be God-centered. We will be ready to listen and practice God’s Word. We will be careful what we say in worship. We will give what we promise or commit to God.

**Ecclesiastes 5** was written to help us take God more seriously in our worship. In worship, our focus must be on God. We must seek to praise Him, confess our sins to Him, thank Him, ask of Him, listen to His Word, and obey His directions. Worship is first about God.

There are a variety of blessings and benefits that come from worshipping God. It is a blessing to worship God! Yet, we must remember that these blessings flow out of a God-centered focus. The blessings and benefits flow out of fearing God and honoring Him. Worship is not about us; it’s first and foremost about God!

In my travels, I often hear about “worship wars.” People tell me about the style of worship that they like and have to have. However, I wonder about this. What does this say about us? What does it say about us when we have to have a particular style of music, worship, or preaching in order to truly worship God? I believe it says that we are spiritually immature. Perhaps we’re not as far along as we think we are in our growth in grace.

One thing that I have learned through the years is that the mature worshiper is easily edified. In other words, the spiritually mature person doesn’t have to depend on a particular style of worship in order to truly worship. The mature worshiper doesn’t have to have a particular style of preaching. I understand that we’re all different and we have differences of tastes when it comes to worship. Yet, true worship isn’t about a particular style; it’s about focusing on God. It’s about singing praise to **God**, praying to **God**, and hearing **God’s** Word preached regardless of styles and preferences.

This means that you can worship God whatever the style of music. You can hear from God even though you don’t have the greatest preacher in the world. Worshiping is about fearing God – knowing He is present and focusing on Him.

The following prayer guide can help you pray about your personal worship. It can also assist you in praying for your church’s worship. You can use this prayer guide to help you prepare for worship. You can pray these things for yourself or for your church. Worship is crucial in the life of the believer and the church. We must cover it in prayer.

Father, I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will be careful and prepared when we come to church. Teach us that we are entering into Your holy presence (**5:1**).

Father, I plead that \_\_\_\_\_ will be ready to hear from You. I ask that we will be quick to hear what You have to say to us from Your Word (**5:1**).

Father, deliver \_\_\_\_\_ us from false worship, from offering the sacrifice of fools (**5:1**).

Father, I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ will be sincere in our worship. I ask that \_\_\_\_\_ will speak and sing from the heart (**5:2**).

Father, I ask that \_\_\_\_\_ will offer sincere encouragement to the others members of \_\_\_\_\_ Church (**5:2**).

Father, empower \_\_\_\_\_ to speak and sing those words that are pleasing to You in worship (5:3).

Father, give \_\_\_\_\_ the grace and power to follow through on our commitments to You. Forgive us for the times we have broken our promises to You. Help us follow through on our commitments to You (5:4).

Father, deliver us from daydreaming in worship. Give us power and help us to stay focused on You and Your Word during worship (5:7).

## The Four Essentials Of The Church

On the day of Pentecost, God used the preaching of Peter to bring many to saving faith in Jesus Christ, “Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls” (Acts 2:41). The people “received” Peter’s preaching of the gospel. They recognized the truth and believed in Jesus Christ. It was a remarkable work of God’s grace. John Stott wrote, “The body of Christ multiplied in Jerusalem 26 times, from 120 to 3,120.

Suddenly, there were 3000 brand new believers! Yet, in spite of all the numbers and the demands of a group that large, there still was simplicity. There were no programs, constitution and by-laws, senior pastors, no marketing plan, no corruption, no tradition . . . not yet. Instead, we see 3120 believers following the leading of the Spirit who lived within them and worked within them.

So what did all these believers do? The Bible provides the answer, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). This verse provides the lowest common denominator of a church – a ground zero of a church. It would be a great help to God’s people if they were reminded of this verse on a regular basis. When the first believers got together, they practiced four essentials. These four essentials are

descriptive of what the early church did. However, they are also prescriptive of what every church must do.

What are the four essentials of the church? They are:

### Teaching

The Bible tells us that they devoted themselves to teaching the apostles’ doctrine. Today the church has the apostles’ teaching represented in the complete Word of God – the Bible. A church must be continually devoted to preaching and teaching the Bible to people. This provides nourishment and stability to the church.

### Fellowship

The word “fellowship” in Acts 2:42 refers to close, mutual relationships where people share things in common and remain involved with one another. Fellowship is not about potluck suppers, dinner on the grounds, or Christian get-togethers. Fellowship means sharing your lives together – whether the times are good or bad. Those in fellowship cultivate an intimate harmony with each other. In the church, the Word of God is learned through teaching and lived out through fellowship.

### Worship

The “breaking of bread” in this text refers to participation in the Lord’s Supper. Baptism is mentioned in the previous verse (2:41). Because of this, we understand that the church devoted themselves to two ordinances commanded by Jesus – baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Baptism represents our conversion to Christ; the Lord’s Supper our lifelong fellowship with Him. The observance of these points us to worship. The church must worship.

### Prayer

The church was devoted to prayer – both corporate and personal. Jesus taught them to pray and they were committed to it. They adored God, confessed their sins, thanked God, petitioned God, and listened to God. Prayer must characterize the church of Jesus.

These are the four essentials of the church. Without these, you can’t have a

church. You can have more than these, but you can never have less than these. If you have more of these, they should never obscure the four essentials of the church.

At the same time, it isn't enough to have the four essentials. You must "continue steadfastly" in them. This phrase means "to continue to do something with intense effort, with the possible implication of doing so despite difficulty." Will there be difficulty? Absolutely! Read the book of Acts. Did the church have opposition and persecution? They did, but they continued steadfastly in the four essentials. God desires the same thing for every church that professes the name of Jesus.

The following is a prayer guide to help you pray for your church. This prayer guide is based on the biblical teaching of the four essentials of the church:

Father, I pray in Jesus' name that \_\_\_\_\_ Church will be committed to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Empower our pastor and teachers to set forth the truth of Your Word clearly and plainly.

Father, I plead in Jesus' name that the members of \_\_\_\_\_ Church will love Your Word and will strive to hear and obey the truth.

Father, I ask that You would enable the members of \_\_\_\_\_ Church to have fellowship with one another. Deliver us from superficial relationships that pass for fellowship. Deepen the unity and the fellowship of this church by the power of the Spirit.

Father, I pray that the members of \_\_\_\_\_ Church will have caring, authentic relationships with each other. Remove anything that might stand in the way of experiencing genuine fellowship through Christ.

Father, I plead that You will empower \_\_\_\_\_ Church to worship You. Create within the members of this church the hunger to worship You in spirit and truth.

Father, I ask that we would lead many to Christ and baptize them. I pray that we would faithfully observe the Lord's Supper. Enable us to grow in Christ by baptism and the Lord's Supper. I pray that our worship will glorify You and will build Your church up in faith.

Father, I plead that You will unleash a spirit of prayer in \_\_\_\_\_ Church. O God, teach us how to pray.

Father, stir this church to seek You. I plead that You will remove the pride and worldliness that will hinder us from genuine prayer. Set this church on fire to call on You and to receive from You.

Father, I plead that \_\_\_\_\_ Church will continue steadfastly in teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer. Grant us the grace to continue no matter what we face. Empower us to be faithful in these things.

Father, I pray that \_\_\_\_\_ Church will put forth a powerful witness for Christ by teaching, fellowship, worship, and prayer.

## Praising God For Answered Prayer

Lately, I've been meditating on two verses of Scripture. They are:

"Blessed be the LORD, because he hath heard the voice of my supplication" (**Psalms 28:6**).

"Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me" (**Psalms 66:18**).

In these verses, the psalmist praises God for answers to prayer. He adores God for hearing and answering their prayers. God is exalted for His answers to prayer.

These verses have caused me to think about the following things. I hope they can do the same for you.

*(1) Do I take the time to praise God for answers to prayer?*

I often ask of God. He is gracious to hear. However, do I take the time to thank Him for answers? I've asked God to help me discern the many ways that He answers me and then praise Him for this. God is worthy of this.

*(2) Answered prayer results from the mercy of God.*

God showed mercy by answering their prayers. God didn't turn away from showing mercy on him (**Psalm 66:18**). Have I taken God's mercy for granted? God's mercy is rich and unceasing. It's the reason He hears and answers me. I don't want to ever forget that

the reason God hears and answers me is the mercy of God.

*(3) God listens to me.*

This is the shocking truth about these verses. God does listen when I cry out to Him. He cares and wants to hear from me. As the psalmist says, God "heard" the voice of my supplication. God hears me. God hears you. What an amazing, phenomenal truth! We must never forget that God does hear. He listens to our voice! How that ought to stir us to pray without ceasing! God actually listens to you and answers you.



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