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DON’T STEP IN THE LAVA

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

We don’t always like what God brings into our lives, or how he’s running things. For instance, our daughter, Carissa, is pregnant with Wesley’s future sibling. Unfortunately, the women in our family don’t do pregnant well. For both Carissa and Anna it generally is a difficult ordeal. Occasionally you’ll hear a woman say she loved being pregnant. You won’t hear that in our family. Poor Carissa is feeling miserable. She has morning sickness. And afternoon sickness. And night sickness. She feels terrible all the time. She eats because she knows she has to in order to stay healthy, but eating right now is an act of sheer will. Mostly even the thought of eating makes her feel like throwing up. This is a quibble I have with God. Why would you create a way of giving birth to a new human being that involves feeling so awful? Yes, I know, you could say this is part of the curse that happened in Eden, but isn’t this a bit of overkill? I mean, come on, she gets to feel terrible for the better part of a year and the reward for that is the screaming fit called child birth? Doesn’t it seem like the childbirth event alone was enough curse for anyone? Why the morning sickness on top of it? That seems like a personal foul to me. Throw the flag on that one. Personal foul. Fifteen yards for unnecessary roughness.

There is no end to the number of ways we might take issue with how God does things in our lives. Laurie and I have had our share of grief that made us ask, “why, Lord?” That is a reality every single one of us will face. How do we deal with that? Ecclesiastes is an effort to take an honest look at how life often looks and feels to us. It describes the confusion, the chaos and the conundrums that make up so much of life. It admits that if all we have to go by is what we see here under the sun, it leads to frustration, bewilderment and despair. But the Teacher wants to show us a better way. He wants to give us some knowledge and wisdom, help us have a perspective that will enable us to have some peace and satisfaction. He gives us a crucial way to deal with life in the passage we look at today. Let’s consider the implications of Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 and see if that can help us.

IT STARTS WITH WORSHIP

Ecclesiastes doesn’t always have a linear argument and a consistent logical train of thought. There are some sections of the book that have a theme. There are other sections that resemble Proverbs, with seemingly unrelated sayings placed next to each other. In the second half of chapter 3 and in chapter 4 there is something of a theme. It doesn’t run straight through the passage, but it is there.

We saw last week that 3:11 made the statement that God has made everything beautiful in its time. God has a plan that he is working and he is using the many events and elements of life to weave this plan together. He is using all of it. But as we have seen, life includes many difficult things. There is a time to weep and a time to mourn. It is hard for us to believe that those times are part of a beautiful plan. In the next chapter and a half the Teacher mentions a number of elements of life that don’t seem beautiful at all. They are the kinds of things that one might raise as an objection to the idea that God is making everything beautiful.

In 3:16 he wrote about injustice, which is common in the world. In 3:19 he discussed death, and how we die just like animals. That definitely is not beautiful. In 4:1 he wrote of oppression of the powerless, which is the way of this world. There are many aspects of life here under the sun that we could cite that make us question the assertion that God is making everything beautiful. Chapter 5 gives us some idea of how we should respond to all of that.

Seeing the beauty of God’s plan and responding properly begins with going to “the house of God.” In Solomon’s day that meant going to the temple in Jerusalem. That was the house of God, the place God had designated that his people should meet with him. What were they to do at the temple? The purpose of going there was to worship. In the Old Testament system that meant offering sacrifices, which was a central component of God’s commands for how they were to worship.

There was a problem for the Jewish people of Solomon’s day. Their “worship” was often merely going through the motions, doing the things they did every year. In fact, that is quite common with religion. It gets reduced to performing rites and rituals because it’s what you’re supposed to do, even though it has no impact on your life. In Isaiah 1:11 God said to Israel, “The multitude of your sacrifices, what are they to me?” In verse 13 he said, “Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New moons, Sabbaths and convocations, I cannot bear your worthless assemblies.” In verse 14 he said he hated what they did with all his being.

What relevance does this have for us? We don’t go to Jerusalem to worship or follow the old practices of the Law of Moses.We are still called by God to worship. Psalm 95:6 says, “Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.” Deuteronomy 6:13 says, “You shall fear only the Lord your God and you shall worship him and swear by his name.” Psalm 99:9 says, “Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy hill. For holy is the Lord our God.” In Isaiah 43:21 God describes his people as “the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise.” We were created for the purposing of praising God, worshiping him. 1 Peter 2:9 says we are a chosen, holy people, set apart so that we may “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” Our purpose is to worship God.

How do we worship God? Hebrews 10:17 says that in Christ our sins are forgiven, then verse 18 says, “Where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.” We don’t worship God by making animals sacrifices anymore. I think it interesting that even the most devout Jews no longer make animal sacrifices even though the Law of Moses commands them to.

Pastor and author Tim Keller says worship is seeing what God is worth and giving him what he is worth. In fact, the English word worship came from the Old English word *worthscipe*, which evolved into worthship, and eventually became worship. So to worship is to see God’s worth and then act upon the worth that we see in him. What is God worth? How do you measure that? How do you measure what anyone or anything is worth? What is Rick Myatt worth? Some would say “not much.” One might answer that question by totaling up my worldly assets and coming up with a figure that is my net worth. I would object that you can’t measure my worth as a human being by how much money I have. Measuring the worth of a human being is a much bigger question than money. How, then, does one determine God’s worth? Psalm 19:10 says of God’s decrees, “They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.” If what God says is more precious than gold, which is the most common image for that which is most precious, doesn’t that mean that God himself is worth more than the most precious thing in human estimation? In other words, he is more valuable than anything else.

Everything that exists is because of God. He created every atom of matter in existence and every bit of what exists in the spiritual realm. Colossians 1:16-17 says, “all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Not only is every single thing created by God, but all things are sustained by him. He keeps that which exists from suddenly dematerializing. What happens to you if your heart suddenly stops beating? Obviously, you die. What keeps your heart beating? Um, well, I work really hard at that. I concentrate on it and make sure it keeps going at a nice even pace. Thump, thump, all the time. Really? You do that when you’re asleep? We don’t control the beating of our hearts. We don’t even think about it except when we’re exercising and need to know our heart rate. What keeps your heart beating right this minute? It’s not you. Ultimately God sees to it that your heart keeps beating. How much is that worth to you?

There is no way to express how much that matters to me. In other words, there is no way to calculate or express how much God is worth, just for that one thing. But that verse in Colossians tells us that what God does for our hearts, he does for everything that exists. What keeps the sun producing heat and light? Well, that would be nuclear fusion reactions. Yes, but what keeps those happening? Ultimately God sustains it. What keeps the earth orbiting around the sun? Gravity. Yes, but why does gravity exist? God sustains it. What if just for a few minutes God suspended the law of gravity? We would cease to exist. God holds everything in the universe together. How much is that worth? Clearly God’s worth is beyond understanding and expression.

How do we respond to God’s immeasurably great value? Keller said we should give him what he is worth. Well that’s not possible. He is worth infinitely more than we could ever offer him. But he is not asking us to give him what we do not have. What he asks us to do is to declare his worth, and we do that in two ways. One is with our words, the other is with our very lives. We offer him what Hebrews 13:17 calls “a sacrifice of praise, the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.” We worship him by saying how awesome he is.

Greg Hollifield is a Dean at the Memphis College of Urban and Theological Studies. He pointed out that tourists from around the world visit the pier at Mallory Square in Key West, Florida every day. They line the railing to reverently watch as the sun sets into the ocean. What is interesting is that there is invariably a response. Every time the sun sets the people clap. Hollifield asks, “For whom do they think they’re clapping?” We can’t help it. When we see something wonderful, something beautiful, something of great value, we respond. We clap. We praise. That’s what worship is. Seeing the great value of God we have to respond by praising him. We clap for him.

But we also worship him by lives that honor him. You often hear me talk about how incredible Laurie is and how much I love her. That’s the sacrifice of praise. But it doesn’t mean much if it’s not backed up by actions. If I say I love her, but then put everything else in life ahead of her in my priorities, that does not honor her. So it is with God. We honor him by loving and serving him. In Romans 12:1 Paul urged us to “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship.” We worship God by making him the center of our lives, by living with him as Lord of everything we are and do.

Remember that the Teacher said we must tread carefully as we go to the house of the Lord. We don’t go to the temple in Jerusalem today, so what does this mean for us? Where is the house of the Lord now? 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” The temple of the Lord is in you! That means that everywhere you go is the house of God. Therefore, worship involves everything we are and everything we do, everywhere we go. In all of it we are to speak and to live in a way that declares how valuable God is.

DON’T OFFER THE SACRIFICE OF FOOLS

Solomon tells us when we worship God we must guard our steps. In other words, tread carefully. I have mentioned several times that Wesley’s favorite TV show has been *Trash Truck*. In one episode of the show, the main character, Hank, and his friends Trash Truck, Donnie, Walter and Miss Mona, get transported in their imaginations to the age of the dinosaurs. There are dangerous beasts roaming the land and volcanoes erupting. At one point they must cross a stream, which in their imaginations has become a lava flow. There are rocks jutting out of the lava, and they must cross the stream by carefully stepping on those rocks. Should they put a foot wrong they would slip into the blazing hot lava, which, of course would mean death. So they are extremely careful where they put each foot. Solomon says we should be that careful and that deliberate about how we worship God.

In her book, *Smoke On The Mountain*, Joy Davidman, who was married to C. S. Lewis, wrote about the commandment to not use God’s name in vain. She said this command, “is not just a nice-Nellyish warning against profanity. It is much more like the sort of warning you see around power plants: ‘Danger – High Voltage!’ The moral seems to be: Be careful how you touch God – he’s dangerous.”

In Leviticus 10:1-2 says, “Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” Yikes. They just wanted to offer worship to God. Hey, all ways to approach God are equally valid, right? Um, maybe not. God seemed pretty upset with those two. Apparently all ways to God aren’t equally valid. That’s one of those passages that makes us very uncomfortable. But the point is worshiping God should be taken seriously. We should watch how we do it. There are a couple of ways that we fail.

One of the ways we can do that is what Israel and what religious people tend to do. That is to do the rituals, go through the motions with no heart in it. When people do that they are doing something that they think will appease God so they can then focus on what they really care about, which is getting something they want in life. This gives us a clue to what is really the heart of the message here.

The Teacher says we should go near to God “to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools.” The sacrifice of fools is contrasted with listening. Verse 2 says, “Do not be quick with your mouth” and ends saying, “Let your words be few.” Somehow the worship of fools has to do with talking a lot rather than listening. Verse 3 says “a dream may come when there are many cares, and many words mark the speech of a fool.” What does this mean? It’s an analogy. It says when we are under a lot of stress it is common to have dreams. Laurie and I both find that it is not uncommon for us to have church dreams on Saturday night. The dreams are a function of stress. The analogy is when there is stress there will be dreams, so when there is a fool there will be a lot of talk. So the worship of fools involves talking a lot.

Does this mean we’re not supposed to talk when we pray? That’s a little odd, isn’t it? That’s not the point. Notice in verse 4 that the Teacher brings up making vows to God. Why do people make vows to God? I remember doing that when I was young and in school. I recall a time or two when I had not put in the time studying for a test that I needed to in order to be prepared. Then came that moment when the teacher hands out the tests and I realized I wasn’t ready. In a couple of those instances I silently prayed and confessed to God that I hadn’t done what I knew I needed to do, but that I really needed to get a good grade on this test. Then came the vow. “Lord, if you will enable me to get a good grade on this test, I promise I will never do this again. I will put in the time to prepare that I know I need to. Really, I will, Lord, so just this once could you show me mercy?”

The vow is about trying to get God to give me something I want. That’s what vows to God are usually about. Is that worshiping God? Is that declaring his worth? No, it is trying to manipulate him into doing what I want him to do. The aim is to get something I want. In these verses listening is the opposite of that. The point is not that you don’t talk to God or ask him for something you want. He tells us specifically that he wants us to make requests to him. The issue is, are you trying to manipulate God, to use him to get what you want? When we do that who are we worshiping? We are worshiping ourselves. We are putting ourselves and our desires at the center, and we’re trying to get God to enlist in our cause. This passage tells us that is the worship of fools. When we listen to God we are submitting to him, and that is real worship.

Our son, Toby, told us he has had several instances recently of dealing with patients who are in the emergency department because they have Covid who insist on telling him how he should treat their disease. They don’t know what they are talking about. He explains patiently what is wrong with their plan for treatment, but in a couple of cases they have become belligerent. They assume they know more than he does, so they don’t listen. Where is a fool there will be a lot of talk. What is needed is some humility and some listening. That’s what we need before God. The natural human tendency is to focus on self and what we want. We then look around for any way we can find to get what we want. God becomes a tool we try to wield to get what we want. “Worship” ends up being an attempt to convince God to do our will.

We humans are masters of the ulterior motive. I recently got an email from a doctor’s office that told me that due to a staffing shortage they were changing how they do things. It explained that essentially all my interactions with the office should be done on line. They even said that if I call the office, they will not answer the phone. I can expect they might call me back 2 days later. All requests for appointments, renewal of medicines, consultations should be done on line. I know the staffing shortage is real. It seems to exist everywhere. But I have a sneaking suspicion that it will never go back to the way it used to be because they can save money by having less staff. There is a hidden motive at work.

In his book, *The Gospel According To Job*, Mike Mason wrote about how at the end of the book of Job, the suffering Job stopped arguing with God and put his hand over his mouth. Mason says, “Perhaps one of the most worshipful gestures of all is the uncommon one that Job here performs: covering his mouth with the hand. This act is a demonstration of total submission. One can fall on one’s face and yet continue to blubber and babble. But to yield the tongue is to yield everything.” That’s exactly right. At the heart of worship is submission to God’s way and will rather than our insistence on our way and our desires.

MAJOR IN FEAR

This passage ends with, “Therefore fear God.” There are quite a few points in the Old Testament especially when we are told we should fear God. Proverbs 9:10 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Being wise starts with fearing God. Psalm 33:8 says, “Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere him.” So we are supposed to be afraid of God and know that worshiping him is dangerous? We are to be afraid if we don’t do it right God is going to send fire from heaven and burn us out, or hit us with some terrible fate? No, that’s not what this means. This is not about cowering in terror because God is an ogre who is going to ruin us.

I live in fear of my wife. There is a long history with this. It goes back to the very beginning of our relationship. Laurie loves to kid around and she likes to provoke reactions. One time we were kidding around in a parking lot outside a restaurant and she pretended to kick me in the one spot a man wants to never get hit. Only she misjudged her kick and landed it squarely on target. Only you guys know the pain of that experience. It hurt the rest of that day. Then there was the time she was joking around again and she smacked me right in the mouth in a restaurant. You can see why I’m afraid of her. I’m just kidding. Sort of. I still flinch when she makes any move to pretend to whack me. But that’s not what I mean when I say I fear my wife. I can give you an idea of what I mean by reminding you that Christmas is coming. I am already feeling the pressure of that. We both love Christmas. I know that she doesn’t really care what present I get for her. But I care. I care deeply. I want to blow her away with a present that she will love, and I hate the idea of giving her something that will just be okay, or that even might disappoint her. I fear that. I don’t fear it because it will have some negative effect on our relationship, or on me. I fear it because I love her so much I want to bring great joy to her, and I hate failing to do that. I am in awe of Laurie. She is an astounding person, and I am both humbled and amazed that she loves me. She loves me in a spectacular way and nothing will change that. That makes me fear ever letting her down, giving her anything less than my best.

That’s a bit like what it means to fear God. This is not the kind of fear that makes you want to be as far from a person as possible. It’s not fear that this person might hurt you. This is the kind of fear that you have for someone you like and admire so much that you always want to be as close to them as possible, but you desperately want to not offend or disappoint them. This is the kind of fear that should drive our worship of God. It should be behind everything we are and everything we do, because worshiping him should be the motive in everything we do. This fear is reverence, love and awe.

IMPLICATIONS

WHY IS WORSHIP IMPORTANT?

Why does worship matter? There are many people who don’t give worship another thought, and it seems like they are just fine. In his novel, *The Brothers Karamozov*, Dostoevski wrote, “So long as a man remains free, he strives for nothing so incessantly and so painfully as to find someone to worship.” His contention is that everyone worships someone or something. Timothy Keller said, “Everyone worships something. The only choice you get is what to worship.” We are going to worship. Who or what we worship and how we worship will determine more than anything else the quality of the life we have.

The late writer, David Foster Wallace, said in a memorable graduation speech, “There is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshiping. Everybody worships.” If we don’t worship God, something or someone else will get our devotion. Sadly, most of the time we end up worshiping ourselves. In that speech after making that point, Wallace also said, “Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely talk about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it’s so socially repulsive, but it’s pretty much the same for all of us deep down. It is our default setting.”

What’s scary about this is that worship of self is the source of all of the pain and suffering that exists. To the degree that we worship self we will inflict pain on others, and even on ourselves. We will discover that worshiping ourselves is both empty and self destructive. The only antidote to this deadly poison is to worship what should be worshiped, the true good, the God of the universe. Worshiping him sets us free.

We need to worship the one true God because that is what we are created to do. We will never be what God wants us to be, never see life as it is and as it should be, never experience real life with passion, meaning, joy, peace and love, until we worship God as the center of everything we are. That’s why worship of God, true worship, is central to life.

Proverbs 14:27 says, “The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life. Fear of the Lord is actually a source of life.” Do you want to really be alive, to experience true life that is like a gushing, roaring River in its power? Then live with boundless reverence and awe for Almighty God. Make worshiping him the point of everything you do, and do it with all your heart.

HOW DOES WORSHIP HELP US WITH GOD’S BEAUTIFUL PLAN?

Worship is at the heart of the issue we have with accepting God’s beautiful plan for life. The tendency we have is to not accept what God is doing because we don’t like the way it appears to be going. So we demand that God gives us what we want. That is putting ourselves at the center. Real worship totally changes that scenario. As we worship God we submit ourselves to his will, even when it may not be what we would choose for ourselves. We will either fight against God or we will worship him. We cannot do both at the same time. The solution for fighting against him and accusing him of having not a beautiful plan but a bad one, is to worship him. It is to proclaim that he is wise, good, loving, holy and powerful, and therefore we can trust in what he does.

Don’t step in the lava. Be careful where you put your foot. That means always come before God with a heart that listens for what he wants, that submits to his will for our lives. Submitting to him with a thankful heart is key to worship.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

First, live continually in the fear of the Lord. Always live in awe of God. When I first started a ministry as a pastor I was asked what I hoped would be true of a church I led. I said there were two things. First, that the people in the church would experience awe of God, and second that they would love each other. I still desire those two things, but the second flows out of the first. It starts with awe of God.

What does that mean, and how do I do that? We were out in Michael and Carissa’s neighborhood recently. This area is known for terrific holiday decorations. I love it at Christmas, but we also noticed a lot of the homes have some pretty elaborate Halloween decorations. What struck me is how creepy and even ghoulish some of them are. Some, for instance, display huge, hairy spiders. Why would you want that out in front of your house? Looking at them makes me shudder. That night after I had noticed this Laurie and I were watching TV and a commercial came on about a movie that’s out right now that looks terrifying. I said to Laurie, “Why would anyone go see that? I would pay money to avoid it if I had to.” Here’s why. That spine tingling jolt of fear people get from being scared, is a cousin of awe. It’s a rather poor cousin of awe, a third rate imitation, but it is related. And we were made for that awe. It is powerful to feel the real thing. So people are drawn to the poor cousin, though what they really want is the real thing, a thunderous jolt of awe of God.

Did you go outside to watch the recent electrical storm? We did. As we were watching it I mentioned to Laurie what it is like to experience being in close proximity to a lightning strike. It is visually spectacular, of course. I’ve been in that situation twice. What I most recall about it was the noise. The thunder was instantaneous and it was overpowering. No word can explain how loud it was, so loud I literally felt it in my entire being. It was awesome, and it made me feel absurdly small.

When people in the Bible had a close encounter with the glory and holiness of God it had an effect a bit like that. It was overpowering and made them feel small, but it was also exciting and awesome. Wherever we go we are at the house of God. Living in awe of him is remembering, living in the reality that he is right here! In his glory and power he is with us and could we see him as he is it would make thunder and lightning seem like child’s play. To live in awe of him is to be aware of his glory, his goodness, his unlimited power, his wisdom and his love for us. It is to know he is real, and that all of that, his glory, goodness, wisdom, power and love are active right this moment in our lives.

Second, practice being a part of corporate worship. Have you ever wondered why we gather and sing songs together? Why does God command us to gather in his name and worship together? Why are we told to sing his praise “in the assembly”? God doesn’t command us things for no reason, and he certainly doesn’t do it because he just wants to make us jump through a bunch of hoops. Part of the reason is it honors God, but another part is that it is critical for us. It brings us back to the truth that God is worthy of our worship. It reminds of who he is and pulls us back to worshiping him in all that we do.

Third, seek to proclaim God’s worth in everything you do. I was doing Wesley duty, taking care of my little 2 year old grandson, one on one. It is a great joy for me, and a big stress. The stress is there for a couple of reasons. One is that Wesley talks to me almost non-stop when we are together. Unfortunately he doesn’t do so in English. He seems to have his own language. I call it Wesleyan. He sprinkles in an occasional word I recognize like more, no, truck, lawnmower, shoe, and so on. But I often don’t know what he’s trying to communicate. So that’s stressful. But the other part of it is trying to keep him occupied. This little fellow is busy with a capital B, capital U, capital S, capital Y, exclamation point, exclamation point. Laurie is like a miracle worker. When she takes care of him she comes up with a constant stream of creative things to do that usually end up with him laughing and saying, “one more,” meaning “do it again.” I, on the other hand, am as interesting as chalk. I’m boring. So I stress, trying to find ways to keep him engaged. But I eagerly try my best because I love his parents and I love that little dude a ton. Being with him is great fun. But it hit me that taking care of Wesley is another way to worship the Lord God. I want to honor him in the way I take care of the little guy. By giving up myself and loving him I am doing something that isn’t for my benefit ultimately, it is for the glory of God. And that is worship.

That is a principle we can and should apply to everything we do. I can worship God while preaching, to be sure, but I can also do it in everything I do. A couple of days ago I spent time ripping apart cardboard boxes to put in our recycle bin. It wasn’t fun. It was kind of annoying actually. But even in doing that I could seek to honor the Lord. Lord, I want to worship you by doing this dumb task with a joyful heart, giving thanks to you because I have this day and the ability to do it. We all can worship God in everything we do. We are the temple of the Lord, so we go to his house no matter where we go or what we do. So let’s not step in the lava. Let’s worship him with all our hearts, and let’s listen, submitting to him in whatever he has for us today, for he is awesome, and what he is doing in our lives is awesome.