

***The King's Classroom: Studies in the Book of Ecclesiastes***

**THE JOY OF KNOWING GOD**

*Ecclesiastes 5:1-20*

14 December 2008 - Highway Church of Christ, Judsonia, AR

**I. Who is God?**

A. Who is God? I'd like for you to reflect upon that question for just a moment.

1. What is he?
2. Where is he?
3. What does he look like?
4. What does he do?
5. I imagine there are as many different answers to these questions as there are people here to answer them.

B. What image comes to your mind when you envision God?

1. That's a dangerous question considering that the Old Testament strictly forbids us from imaging God (Deuteronomy 4:15-20).

2. But we have our images, nevertheless.

a. Perhaps you picture Michelangelo's God from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He's old and gray, but strong.

1). Kind of like your grandpa meets He-Man.

2). People like the grandpa God.

3). Everyone knows that grandpas don't spank; they spoil. They are adorably out of touch, thrilled when their grandchildren come to see them, and want more than anything for all of them to have a good time.

4). I talked to a student recently who has this view of God. He's in a terribly

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immoral situation, and contemplating even more immorality to solve his problem, and so I asked him, "What would God say to you, right now, in this situation?"

5). He thought for a moment, and then he answered: "He would tell me he wants me to be happy, and that he doesn't want my life to be messed up right now." I said, "Yeah, that's sounds like my grandpa, too."

b. In the last few years Morgan Freeman has given us a depiction of God in the movies *Bruce Almighty* and *Evan Almighty*. That God is a really cool cat.

c. Those of you who are older might remember Carl Reiner's and George Burns' interpretation of God from the movies *Oh God!* and *Oh God, You Devil!* I don't know how to describe this character other than to read the movie poster: "Anybody who could turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt, incinerate Sodom and Gomorrah, and make it rain for forty days and forty nights has got to be a fun guy."

C. Who is God? What image comes to your mind when you envision God? Is that image adequate?

D. Scripture reveals a great deal to us about God.

1. He is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe (Genesis 1:1).

2. He is "compassionate and gracious . . . slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6-7a).

3. He is the Good Shepherd (Psalm 23:1; Ecclesiastes 12:11).

4. He is love (1 John 4:16), and he is light (1 John 1:5).

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5. He is everything we have ever wanted in a God, and then some.

E. Who is God? What image comes to your mind when you envision God? Is that image adequate? Is it accurate?

1. It seems to me that we spend a great deal of time trying to make God in our image.

2. That shouldn't surprise you; it's been going on since the Garden of Eden.

3. In the Garden of Eden the serpent convinced Eve that God was like her - hateful, oppressive, and just the slightest bit insecure. Then he convinced her that she could be like God - omniscient, omnipotent, and eternal.

4. From that moment on, the image of God, as he really is, was lost.

5. So today, he's George Burns, Morgan Freeman, your grandpa, or some conflagration of proof-texted Scriptures that perfectly fits the description of what one wants in a God.

F. I ask you again: Who is God?

### **II. Ecclesiastes' God.**

A. If human beings desire to know God, we must consider all that the Scriptures say about him.

1. We can't just take the passages we like, or the ones that fit our preconceived notions, and formulate our own personal versions of God. Those are called idols.

2. We must listen to what God's Word says about him, even when that Word is difficult to hear.

3. With that in mind, I want you to turn to Ecclesiastes chapter five.

B. In Ecclesiastes 5, the wise man offers some very important insights into the nature of God, and we would do well to pay attention. Ecclesiastes 5:1-7:

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**1** 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.

**2** 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.

**3** As a dream comes when there are many cares,  
so the speech of a fool when there are many words.

**4** When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. **5** It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. **6** Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake." Why should God be angry at what you say and destroy the work of your hands? **7** Much dreaming and many words are meaningless. Therefore stand in awe of God.

C. Ecclesiastes has a different picture of God than his contemporaries.

1. For sure his God is the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe (12:1), and the Giver of life and all good things (5:18-20).
2. But there is more to him than that.
3. This is not a God of the Teacher's own making, or anyone else's for that matter.
4. Ecclesiastes' God is God as he really is.
5. He is a God who is both transcendent and imminent.

D. Ecclesiastes' God is a **TRANSCENDENT** God.

1. To speak of God's transcendence is to speak of his distance.

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2. "God is in heaven and you are on earth" (5:2).  
God is in heaven, and you are "under the sun," or  
"under the heaven."

3. The teacher illustrates this distance time and  
again in his lectures.

a. Consider his address of God.

1). Forty times the Teacher calls him  
*Elohim*, which is the general designation  
for "God."

2). He never calls him by his personal  
name of YHWH, which is used so frequently  
in the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

b. Consider his experience of God. For the  
Teacher, God is beyond human reach and  
understanding.

1). He says earlier: "He has made  
everything beautiful in its time. He has  
also set eternity in the hearts of men;  
yet they cannot fathom what God has done  
from beginning to end" (3:11).

2). And again later:

"Consider what God has done:  
Who can straighten  
what he has made crooked?

When times are good, be happy;  
but when times are bad, consider:  
God has made the one  
as well as the other.  
Therefore, a man cannot discover  
anything about his future" (7:13-14).

c. For the Teacher, there is a distance  
between God and man.

*God is not one of us.  
He is not a slob like one of us.  
He is not a stranger on a bus trying to  
make his way home.*

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*Up to heaven all alone.  
Like a holy rolling stone.*

d. The distance of God is a reality of life that many would just as soon ignore.

e. They would just as soon ignore it, because it is a distance that results from God's holiness and man's unholiness.

f. Did you realize that holiness is the characteristic most typical of God in the Old Testament?

1). Holiness refers to that mystery in the divine being that distinguishes God as God, and marks him off from what he has created.

2). He tells Hosea: "For I am God and not man - the Holy One among you" (Hosea 11:9).

3). This holiness is experienced in many ways in the Old Testament.

a). Isaiah catches a glimpse of it in a moment of worship in the temple. He sees God, he sees himself, and he sees the distance: "Woe to me . . . I am ruined" (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah was right to fear, because God's holiness is understood throughout the Bible as an awful power that is dangerous, unapproachable, and fearsome.

b). The people of Israel trembled when they stood before the Lord at Sinai (Exodus 19).

c). Nadab and Abihu were destroyed when they brought unauthorized fire before the Lord (Leviticus 10:1-3). To which the Lord said, "Among those who approach me I will show myself

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holy; in the sight of all the people  
I will be honored" (Leviticus 10:3).

d). Seventy residents of Beth  
Shemesh died when they looked into  
the Ark of the Covenant, In response  
they cried out, "Who can stand in the  
presence of the LORD, this holy God"  
(1 Samuel 6:20)?

e). And of course we all know the  
stories of Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:6-8),  
and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-  
11).

1). That's right, this concept  
carries over into the New  
Testament as well.

2). The writer of Hebrews  
warns, "It is a dreadful thing  
to fall into the hands of the  
living God" (Hebrews 10:31).

3). And later, "Therefore,  
since we are receiving a kingdom  
that cannot be shaken, let us be  
thankful, and so worship God  
acceptably with reverence and  
awe, for our 'God is a consuming  
fire'" (Hebrews 12:28-29).

4. This is the very point the Teacher makes in this  
lesson: God is holy, and when we approach him, we'd  
better take it seriously.

5. Notice all the imperatives here in these verses  
in Ecclesiastes 5:

- a. "Guard your steps."
- b. "Go near to listen."
- c. "Do not be quick with your mouth."
- d. "Do not be hasty in your heart."

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- e. "Let your words be few."
- f. "Do not delay in fulfilling your vow."
- g. "Do not let your mouth lead you into sin."
- h. "Do not protest the temple messenger."
- i. "Stand in awe of God."

6. If the question is, "How does one approach a holy God in worship?" The answer is, "Very carefully."

7. The picture here is of man going worship in an attempt to manipulate God into giving him his heart's desires.

a. He believes he can say the right things and do the right things to make God beholden to him.

b. He believes he can manipulate God - or pursue God for profit - in the same way he's attempted to pursue wisdom, education, wealth, his environment, and his neighbors.

c. What he discovers is that God cannot be manipulated.

1). God is in heaven. You are on earth.  
Let your words be few.

2). You are not here to tell God anything, but to listen and receive.

3). You are here to fear God, to stand in awe of him.

8. How should that understanding transform the way we come before God in worship?

a. The Teacher says we should guard our steps. To guard one's steps is to take responsibility for one's lifestyle. God is holy, and we must come before him with holy lives.



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b. The Teacher says we should be careful what we say and do in worship. We are not here to impress God with our acts of piety. Neither are we here to make promises we cannot keep. We are here to listen and to receive a blessing. [You can't do that if you're texting or petting on your girlfriend.]

c. Finally, the Teacher says we should fear God, or stand in awe of him.

d. Does it really matter to God how we come to worship, and what we do when we're here? You bet it does, because God is holy.

e. Dare we continue to come before him with our agendas, our grudges, our jealousies, our lateness, our disruptions, our lunch plans, and our steps out of step with his own? It will not do to stay out late partying on Saturday, and roll in here late Sunday morning, half awake and half paying attention, just biding your time until you can take the prescribed amount of Lord's Supper and get out the door.

9. God is transcendent, so "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God . . . . God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few."

E. Now, such a view of God may be disturbing to some.

1. If God is so distant, can humans ever really know him?

2. I want you to consider just briefly one other characteristic of Ecclesiastes' God.

F. Ecclesiastes' God is an IMMINENT God.

1. To speak of God's imminence is to speak of his nearness.

2. It may seem paradoxical to speak both of God's transcendence and imminence, but this is the truth about God, this is God as he really is.

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3. He is distant from us. He is not one of us. He is wholly other than us.

4. But - praise be to God - he has bridged the gap between himself and us.

5. As chapter five proceeds, the Teacher explains more of what life is like here under the sun.

a. In a world separated from God there is oppression, injustice, and the greedy pursuit of profit.

b. The result is that "All [man's] days he eats in darkness, with great frustration, affliction, and anger" (5:17).

c. But listen, God's distance from us does not mean that he is disinterested or unconcerned about our lives here.

6. Notice verses 18-20: "**18** Then I realized that it is good and proper for a man to eat and drink, and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him— for this is his lot. **19** Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work— this is a gift of God. **20** He seldom reflects on the days of his life, because God keeps him occupied with gladness of heart."

7. In these verses we catch a glimpse of how God bridges the gap between himself and us, and how he makes himself known to us.

a. These words show us how God makes the connection between heaven and earth.

b. The pleasures of eating, and drinking, and engaging in enjoyable work are the things that God gives us.

c. Three times in this paragraph the Teacher emphasizes that everything we are and everything we have comes as a gift from a beneficent God.

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d. Even though God is "Wholly Other," he demonstrates unmistakable loving care for his creatures.

e. Psalm 113 perfectly sums up the Teacher's God.

Praise the LORD.

Praise, O servants of the LORD,  
praise the name of the LORD.  
Let the name of the LORD be praised,  
both now and forevermore.  
From the rising of the sun to the place where  
it sets,  
the name of the LORD is to be praised.  
The LORD is exalted over all the nations,  
his glory above the heavens.  
Who is like the LORD our God,  
the One who sits enthroned on high,  
who stoops down to look  
on the heavens and the earth?  
He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;  
he seats them with princes,  
with the princes of their people.  
He settles the barren woman in her home  
as a happy mother of children.

Praise the LORD.

### **III. Conclusion**

A. I want to read you a passage from C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. READ 79-80.

B. This is our transcendent and imminent God.

C. What a joy it is to know that a God so unsafe is also so good, that he is our King.

D. He is holy and he is distant, yet he is gracious and he is near.

E. How do you respond to such a God?

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- a. How else can you respond but in gratitude for who he is and what he's done?
- b. At this time of year, we consider all the gifts that he has given.
- c. And the greatest gift of all is Jesus Christ. God did become one of us. He put on flesh and he came to live among us. You can't get any nearer than that.
- d. Through the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, God takes away our sins, makes us holy in his sight, and brings us near to him. This is the joy we have in knowing God.
- e. The writer of Hebrews says: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful" (10:19-23).
- f. The Teacher was born too early to know this God. Do you know him?