



The Book of Ecclesiastes

(The search for the ultimate maxim to explain the nature of life).



Chapter 5

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The book of Ecclesiastes occupies a unique position in the Bible due to its prevalent sense of pessimism and absence of God's intervention in our world. In fact, the all-prevailing mood of a God remote from our human condition sets the tone for Ecclesiastes which seems incongruent with the other books of the Old Testament. It contains reflections, more philosophical in nature, rather than a testimony of belief, which we would normally associate with the Hebrew scriptural tradition. For the traditional author, in the Book of Ecclesiastes, God is the inscrutable originator of the world who determines the fate of humankind. Just as the natural is in constant movement minus the presence of real change, so the human expenditure of energy comes to nought, despite the fact that reason leaves us baffled, the author affirms that life is worth living with all its limitations. The following metaphor (literal) interpretation, on the chapters of the Book of Ecclesiastes, are by Saint Gregory Thaumaturgus, an early Father of the Church.

Chapter 5

Moreover, it is a good thing to use the tongue sparingly, and to keep a calm and rightly balanced heart in the exercise of speech. For it is not right to give utterance in words to things that are foolish and absurd, or to all that occur to the mind; but we ought to know and reflect, that though we are far separated from heaven, we speak in the hearing of God, and that it is good for us to speak without offense. For as dreams and visions of many kinds attend manifold cares of mind, so also silly talking is conjoined with folly. Moreover, see to it, that a promise made with a vow be made good in fact. This, too, is proper to fools, that they are unreliable. But be true to your word, knowing that it is much better for you not to vow or promise to do anything, than to vow and then fail of performance. And you ought by all means to avoid the flood of base words, seeing that God will hear them. For the man who makes such things his study gets no more benefit by them than to see his doings brought to nought by God. For as the multitude of dreams is vain, so also the multitude of words. But the fear of God is man's salvation, though it is rarely found. Wherefore you ought not to wonder though you see the poor oppressed, and the judges misinterpreting the law. But you ought to avoid the appearance of surpassing those who are in power.

For even should this prove to be the case, yet, from the terrible ills that shall befall you, wickedness of itself will not deliver you. But even as property acquired by violence is a most hurtful as well as impious possession, so the man who lusts after money never finds satisfaction for his passion, nor good-will from his neighbours, even though he may have amassed the greatest possible wealth. For this also is vanity. But goodness greatly rejoices those who hold by it, and makes them strong, imparting to them the capacity of seeing through all things. And it is a great matter also not to be engrossed by such anxieties: for the poor man, even should he be a slave, and unable to fill his belly plentifully, enjoys at least the kind refreshment of sleep; but the lust of riches is attended by sleepless nights and anxieties of mind. And what could there be then more absurd, than with much anxiety and trouble to amass wealth, and keep it with jealous care, if all the while one is but maintaining the occasion of countless evils to himself? And this wealth, besides, must needs perish some time or other, and be lost, whether he who has acquired it has children or not; Job 20:20 and the man himself, however unwillingly, is doomed to die, and return to earth in the selfsame condition in which it was his lot once to come into being. Job 1:21; 1 Timothy 6:7 And the fact that he is destined thus to leave earth with empty hands, will make the evil all the sorer to him, as he fails to consider that an end is appointed for his life similar to its beginning, and that he toils to no profit, and labours rather for the wind, as it were, than for the advancement of his own real interest, wasting his whole life in most unholy lusts and irrational passions, and withal in troubles and pains. And, to speak shortly, his days are darkness to such a man, and his life is sorrow. Yet this is in itself good, and by no means to be despised. For it is the gift of God, that a man should be able to reap with gladness of mind the fruits of his labours, receiving thus possessions bestowed by God, and not acquired by force. For neither is such a man afflicted with troubles, nor is he for the most part the slave of evil thoughts; but he measures out his life by good deeds, being of good heart in all things, and rejoicing in the gift of God.