

Ecclesiastes 5:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it—the Hebrew neder (נָדֵר, vow) refers to voluntary religious promises made to God, often conditional ("If You do X, I will do Y") or expressions of devotion. The command al te'acher (אֲלֵךְתָּאֵכֶר, defer not) means do not delay or be late. Unlike secular contracts, vows to God carried absolute moral obligation (Deuteronomy 23:21-23).

For he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed—God takes no delight (chephets, צְפֵדֶת) in kesilim (כְּסִילִים, fools), those who treat sacred commitments carelessly. The fool makes rash promises then ignores them. This echoes Jephthah's tragic vow (Judges 11:30-40) and Ananias and Sapphira's broken promise (Acts 5:1-11). Ecclesiastes teaches that voluntary vows create binding obligations—better never to vow than to vow and break faith.

Historical Context

Ancient Israel's worship included voluntary vows alongside mandatory sacrifices. Hannah vowed to dedicate Samuel to God's service (1 Samuel 1:11), and the Nazirite vow involved specific consecration (Numbers 6). Vows were serious covenant acts, invoking God's name as witness. Breaking vows constituted covenant violation, profaning God's holiness. Deuteronomy 23:21-23 legislated vow-keeping, and Proverbs 20:25 warned against rash vows. Jesus later taught that vows should not be necessary—let your yes be yes (Matthew 5:33-37). The early church discouraged unnecessary vows, emphasizing simple integrity.

Medieval monasticism elevated vows (poverty, chastity, obedience), while Reformers questioned whether such vows were biblically warranted, preferring general Christian obedience over special vows.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. Have you made promises to God—in crisis, gratitude, or devotion—that you have not fulfilled?
2. How does this verse challenge the casual way we sometimes make commitments to God in prayer or worship?

Interlinear Text

כִּי	אָשָׁר	תִּדְבֹּר	לֹא	לְאֱלֹהִים	בְּדַרְךָ	אֵל	שְׁלָמָם:	תַּאֲכִיר
H834	When thou vowest	H5087	a vow	H5088	unto God	H430	defer	not to pay
H3588	H369	H2656	it for he hath no pleasure	H3684	in fools	H853	H309	H7999
רְשָׁמָם:	אָשָׁר	אֵת	בְּכִסֵּיל	יְמִינָה	אֵת	אָשָׁר	תַּאֲכִיר	שְׁלָמָם:
When thou vowest	not to pay	H5087	H7999	H3684	H853	H309	H7999	H834

Additional Cross-References

Numbers 30:2 (Parallel theme): If a man vow a vow unto the LORD, or swear an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.

Psalms 76:11 (References God): Vow, and pay unto the LORD your God: let all that be round about him bring presents unto him that ought to be feared.

Matthew 5:33 (Parallel theme): Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths:

Psalms 50:14 (References God): Offer unto God thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the most High:

Psalms 116:14 (Parallel theme): I will pay my vows unto the LORD now in the presence of all his people.

Malachi 1:10 (Parallel theme): Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand.

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