

Investing Our Lives Wisely and Boldly

We are coming near the end of Ecclesiastes and just to recap briefly, Solomon uses his God-given wisdom and vast wealth, power, and fame to explore every possible avenue to find meaning in life: he tries buying and accumulating things and wealth, then he tries indulging every pleasure, he tries fame and sex and power and building things. He tries being wise and he tries going crazy. He gives laziness a shot and then he tries working hard and accomplishing great things. And what he learns is that from an "under the sun" perspective (a phrase that's not found anywhere else in the Bible but used in Eccles. 29 times), an earthbound perspective where God and the afterlife aren't factored in, everything is meaningless. The Hebrew word is *heber*, it means vapor or smoke. Life is like a vapor - a puff of smoke - that no matter how you try to get a grip on it, just slips through your fingers and is gone in a moment. It's uncertain and filled with unknowns. And then there's this glitch in the system where sometimes the righteous have bad things happen to them, and the wicked have good things happen to them. Solomon observes that wisdom always leads to a better life than foolishness, but ultimately (and again, this is from an "under the sun" perspective) no matter how a person lives, wisely or foolishly, all lives come to the dead end of the grave and whatever they accomplished ends up being meaningless.

But week after week we have also seen Christ in these chapters. We have been reminded that our hope isn't "under the sun" but above and beyond the sun. Jesus came down from heaven to give us hope that reaches beyond our time in this world and into eternity. Jesus said, "those who believe in me will never die." God has truly, as Solomon wrote, set eternity in the heart of man. One day God will do away with the earth and the sun and the heavens as we know them and He will create a new heaven and earth. And our Lord's promise to us who trust in him is that we will be there to see all of this happen. Our hope isn't under the sun but is above and beyond the sun. Our hope is in Christ.

But in the meantime what do we do with our lives? Hearing Solomon tell us that life is uncertain and unknown and like a vapor can make us respond by wanting to play it safe, take no chances, take no risks, just get by. Solomon tells us to do just the opposite, he urges us to invest our lives boldly and wisely! Let's read chapter 11 vv. 1-6 together.

Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.² Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.³ If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there it will lie.⁴ Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

⁵As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed^[a] in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things. ⁶Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. **Eccles. 11:1-6**

Back in the 70's there was a chorus we used to sing based on the KJV version of this verse that said, "keep on casting your bread upon the waters, soon it's going to come back home on every wave." It was a catchy song but it never made much sense to me Why would I want to keep on casting my bread upon the water, and if I did, would I really want it to come back to me? Old, soggy bread doesn't sound that appealing.

I think the NIV's translation gives us a better sense of what Solomon means here: *Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return.* That's what casting your bread on the waters means. Solomon knew something about shipping - 1 Kings 10:22 tells us he had a vast fleet of merchant ships and they would send them out laden with resources and they would return once every three years with

gold and silver and ivory and other riches. Solomon is saying take the risk of shipping out your grain (or spices, or logs or whatever trade you were in), in pursuit of a good return on your investment. There are principles here for how we should live our lives, principles that we see throughout the Bible.

1. Our lives get bigger when we invest them beyond ourselves

Don't hoard your life - invest it boldly and wisely! Solomon knew that every time he sent a ship out with expensive cargo, he was putting that cargo and crewmen at risk. The bottom of the Mediterranean sea is littered with shipwrecks. But he knew he couldn't expand and enrich his kingdom by hoarding his resources, he needed to send them out, he needed to cast his bread upon the waters if he wanted a return on his investment.

There is a strange paradox in life: when we hoard (keep to ourselves and not use) the gifts and resources God has given us, we end up with less, not more, life. An old 19th century English preacher put it eloquently when he wrote:

It is possible to evade a multitude of sorrows through the cultivation of an insignificant life. Indeed, if a man's ambition is to avoid the troubles of life, the recipe is simple: shed your ambitions in every direction, cut the wings of every soaring purpose, and seek a life with the fewest contacts and relations. If you want to get through the world with the smallest trouble, you must reduce yourself to the smallest compass. Tiny souls can dodge through life; bigger souls are blocked on every side. As soon as a man begins to enlarge his life, his resistances are multiplied. Let a man remove his petty selfish purposes and enthrone Christ, and his sufferings will be increased on every side. ~ John Henry Jowett

If you want to avoid heartaches and troubles and disappointments and failure the way to do it is to make your life as small as possible. Reduce your life to as small a target as possible. Risk as little as possible and invest yourself beyond yourself as little as possible. Hide your life under the mattress to keep it safe! The price we pay though, is a very, very small life. Like the little ditty that says,

There once was a very cautious man who never laughed or cried, He never cared, he never dared, He never dreamed or tried. And when one day he passed away, his insurance was denied. For since he never really lived, they claimed he never died. - Unknown Author

The Lord invites us to live by investing our lives wisely and boldly! Wisely because foolishness leads to big problems, but boldly because there will always be risk involved with opportunity. Faith always needs a component of risk or it's not faith. Hebrews 11, the hall of faith, would be a much different chapter if you took all the element of risk out of it. It would say something like:

- *By faith Abraham stayed in his own country and never went anywhere...*
- *By faith Moses' parents gave Moses to Pharaoh to be killed along with the other Hebrew boys...*
- *By faith Joshua's army took one look at Jericho and walked away, saying, the walls are too high, let's look for an easier target...*

You get the idea. Faith always has risk involved. Solomon invites us into the risk of investing what we have for a bigger return. Jesus invites us to do the same in the parable about the master who gives his servants a number of talents and expects them to invest them in some enterprise so that they gain a return on them. The servant who is afraid of losing the talent entrusted to him buries it - no exposure to risk - and then gives it back exactly as he got it to his master. Jesus calls him a wicked and lazy servant. We don't want to bury our lives by playing it safe, avoiding risk, and not investing our lives in God's work. So how do we invest ourselves wisely and boldly? Solomon gives us two pieces of advice.

2. Diversify your investment portfolio

Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. vs. 2

Solomon is saying, "don't put all your investments into one ship." We'd say, "don't put all your eggs in one basket". If you invest everything you have in one venture, and that venture fails, you're done for. Diversify your portfolio - spread out your investments - so even if something goes wrong and one thing you invest in goes south, you've got other investments in the works. Verse 6 says something similar but using an agricultural metaphor:

⁶ Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.

Sow seed constantly because you never know which seeds will take and which will not. Obviously we're not trying to give financial or agricultural advice this morning, so what does this mean in our lives and in particular how we invest ourselves beyond ourselves and in the work of God? I think first of all by recognizing that opportunities to invest our lives in meaningful, God-glorifying ways are literally all around us if we will just look.

If you're employed, there are opportunities to invest yourself in those you work with, but it might take looking at your job in a different light. I remember sitting next to a guy at a banquet some years ago, and when I told him I was a pastor he told me he wanted to quit his job and go into the ministry too. When I asked him what he did for a living, he said he was a guidance counselor at a local high school. I remember thinking what an amazing opportunity for ministry he already had! Sharing the Lord with people at your workplace might be difficult and you need to be careful how and when you do it, but there are tremendous opportunities to be a light for Jesus at your workplace.

One of the biggest ways is our everyday interactions with those around us - our family and friends. Look for opportunities to invest in those closest to you. It can be a kind and encouraging word, or by taking the time to spend time with them, it can take the shape of listening to them when they're dealing with something or just having a bad day, it can be talking about scripture and biblical perspectives when you're with them. Probably not the best to preach or lecture them, but sometimes relational investing will mean challenging unbiblical thinking with biblical thinking in a loving and humble way. Or it might just be an act of kindness.

I know someone who had neighbors who were going through a hard time. The husband had had some serious health issues and had been in the hospital for a while and was due to come home the next day. My friend noticed that the lawn was pretty high and thought he'd bless them by mowing it. So when he saw that the wife wasn't home he just went over and mowed it, didn't leave a note or anything. But the next day she came over and she shared that when she got home and saw the lawn mowed it touched her so much that she just sat in her car and cried. She thought she was going to be out late mowing the lawn in the dark to get ready the house ready for her husband to come home.

There are so many ways and so many opportunities, large and small, for us to purposely invest ourselves beyond ourselves. Let me put a plug in for serving in the church in the various opportunities available. You have no idea what life you can touch directly or indirectly by sowing into the church. We've had children learn a lesson in CM and then go home and tell their parents they want to accept Jesus into their hearts. That CM teacher had no idea that the Lord would use them that day to help a child come to faith in Christ.

The thing about it is, when we sow seeds, we don't know which seeds will produce fruit and which ones won't. When we send out ships, we don't know which ships will come back with a great return and which ones won't. Sometimes we will invest time and effort in a person or a ministry or an opportunity and nothing will seem to come of it. Don't let that discourage you! Keep sowing, keep sending out ships, keep investing, keep casting your bread upon the waters. When a farmer sows seeds, some come up and some don't. If a farmer decides he's only going to sow a seed if he knows it will germinate, he'll never sow any seeds cause there's no way to know which seeds will take and which ones won't. That's God's job - we sow, we water, but God causes the growth. God certainly may call you to focus a lot on one particular venture more than others for a time. Moms with young children, that's your primary ministry and there probably isn't going to be a lot left over for much else, but that's an incredibly important ministry. You are sowing into your child's life seeds that will affect them for the rest of their lives so keep sowing.

But even if God has you in a season where most of your attention is focused in one or two directions, it's good to throw some seed in other directions too. And for most of us, we would be wise to invest in many directions, to diversify our portfolio, invest in eight ventures with the hope that three or four bring a return.

3. Look for the right time, but don't wait for the perfect time

If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there it will lie. ⁴ Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. Vv. 3-4

Solomon is warning us against waiting until the conditions are perfect before we do anything, because if we do we'll end up never doing anything. He pictures someone who watches the wind and the clouds and says, today's pretty good, but bad weather could be just around the corner, so I'd better wait to plant, I'd better wait to reap. Again this brings us back to risk and faith. Waiting for the perfect conditions is saying, "I'll take a step of faith, when I know that step can't possibly fail." Well, that's not really a step of faith, is it? Fear speaks to our hearts and says, "don't sow today, don't send out your ships out today, don't invest today. Conditions might be better tomorrow."

Studies have found that more often the biggest regrets in people's lives aren't what they did, but what they didn't do. They regret opportunities not taken. God doesn't want us looking back in regret, but He does want us to step out in faith and seize that opportunity today.

It's good to be wise, it's good to look for the right time. But remember that fear can paralyze us into inaction, often with the excuse that the time isn't right. If you see the tendency to let the perfect paralyze you from taking opportunities when they arise, bring that to God in prayer. Ask the Lord to help you discern between the right time and the perfect time. Ask God to increase your faith so that you're ready to take a step when you can't see where that step is going to lead. Ask God to give you the courage to act decisively and boldly in His name.

Solomon goes on in verse 5 to remind us of a very important truth: we don't know everything. We will always be operating with some things out of our control and some degree of ignorance.

⁵As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.(vs. 5)

So much in this world we can't understand. We've learned a lot about weather patterns and meteorological science, but we can't predict the weather perfectly, and we certainly can't control the weather. We know a lot more about what goes on in a mother's womb, but how a baby is knit together, and how life enters into that baby, we just don't know. We don't even know what life really is. What is the human soul? What intangible spirit makes a person who they are? When does that spirit enter the baby and how? Even with all our science, these questions are beyond us.

So we can't understand the work of God. Faith isn't understanding everything that God is doing, it's trusting God to take that one step that we hear Him telling us to take. We know, better than Solomon did, how awesome and faithful God is! Our trust is in Him. If we blow it - and I have many times, believe me - we can trust God to clean up our mess. I have had situations go sideways real bad and then my faith is, "O God, please help this situation that I've messed up get straightened out!" And God has met me there and has helped me through. I look back on some things with regret. I'd do them differently if I could. But God has helped me through them and actually brought some good even out of messes that I've made.

Invest your life wisely and boldly! Don't be foolish, don't purposely do dumb things, but don't try to live a risk-free life either. If you never sow seeds, if you never send ships out, if you never cast bread on the water, you may hold onto what you have, but you'll be missing out on the returns, the blessings that God has in store for you. Trusting God gets messy - it has to. But we learn in that mess that we can trust the Lord. We learn that our Father is watching over us. We learn that Jesus is a faithful friend, not just when things are going well, but when things are going badly. He's a faithful friend not just when we succeed, but even more so when we fail big time. And our trust isn't in what we do, but in what Jesus has done and what Jesus is doing. Jesus died to save us, and not just to save us, but to use us to bring his love and salvation to others. So let's keep on casting, keep on sending our ships out, keep on sowing, and keep on trusting God to bring the returns He intends.