

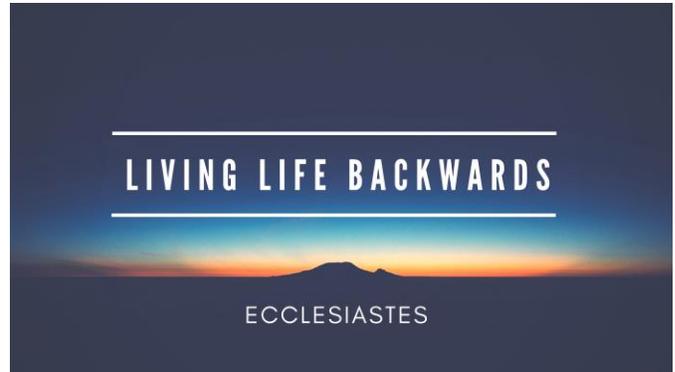
Cast Your Bread Upon the Waters

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Living Life Backwards, Part 9

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We're continuing our series in Ecclesiastes and are coming toward the end—I think there will be two more weeks after today. This is a book that deals with questions humanity has been wrestling with for ages. What am I really here for? What's the purpose of my life? Is there any objective value or meaning to this life which sometimes feels meaningless? In the beginning of Ecclesiastes, the author looks at a lot of places where people try to find satisfaction and meaning. He talks about wealth and possessions. Then he talks about vocation—working hard at your job. He talks about knowledge and wisdom and learning. He then looks at different types of pleasure that we have available in our world.

The conclusion he comes to over and over again throughout this book is that it's all vanity which is a word that means temporary, like a breath or vapor. He describes life on this earth—or as he puts it, “life under the sun”—as being transient and ultimately not satisfying. He says chasing after these things is like chasing after the wind because you can't capture it. It seems as though you're able to make sense of life, but then you realize what you thought you had grasped is gone.

Yet the writer does not conclude that life has no meaning. All the way through the book there are hints that he actually does believe there is meaning and value in this life, even though it's hard to find. Especially toward the end of the book, he's writing to persuade us of how we live in a life like this and how we live in a world that's temporary and fleeting, sometimes feeling pointless.

Last week David looked at Ecclesiastes 9, focusing on the joy in life and how we're to enjoy the gifts God has given us. He said when we begin to view life from an eternal perspective—viewing life “backwards” from the end—we realize that at one point we're all going to die and enter into eternity. But if we keep that in mind then we can be free from being consumed by the things of this world, no longer making them idols or living for them. We will no longer think money or success

or knowledge can bring us true happiness. On the other hand, this view allows us to be free to really enjoy them as gifts from the God Who loves us.

We're actually skipping over Ecclesiastes 10, not because it's bad, but because we've already touched on the themes it contains. It also reflects Proverbs in contrasting wisdom and foolishness. So today we're going to look at the first six verses in chapter 11, in which the writer calls us to consider how we're to live in this "life under the sun," even when there are so many things we simply can't understand.

Let me pray, then we'll look at our text.

God, as we look at Your Word, please help us to be shaped by it and to submit ourselves to it. May we seek to know You through these words and know ourselves better, so that we would leave today more conformed to the image of Christ. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We'll turn now to Ecclesiastes 11:1-6:

Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. ² Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. ³ If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. ⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

⁵ As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. ⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

This is the Word of God.

This probably isn't a passage you have memorized. It's probably not displayed on your wall at home. But the longer I've spent time with this passage, believing this is God's Word, He's been shaping me by it. I hope to find some ways from this text to help us see what it's like to live in this world under the sun. What are we called to do? Is there meaning?

I would summarize the text this way: In our uncertain world, faith in God frees us to actively engage in life with wise risks.

Humbly recognize your place in an uncertain world.

We'll first focus on the uncertainty of our world. Four times in these six verses we are told, "You do not know..." The first one occurs in verse two, where it says, "*You know not what disaster*

may happen on earth.” Said another way, we don’t know the future. Natural disasters are still difficult to predict. What’s astounding to me is that this text was written over 3,000 years ago, yet while human advances in technology are exponentially better than it was then and know more about some of these things listed, they are still generally unpredictable.

It’s impressive to watch our modern weather forecasts and see how accurately they can tell us what will be coming. It’s likely that over the next few weeks we’ll be hearing about some hurricane that’s coming. Yet despite all the computer data and projections and all the agreement between the meteorologists, right at the last minute we’ve seen them change course, landing somewhere unexpected.

With all our technology, there are many natural disasters we have no way of predicting. For example, storms are easier to predict than earthquakes. Seismologists admit we still are nowhere near being able to forecast when an earthquake will hit. They can tell us that a certain area is likely to have an event sometime in the next 20 years, but to actually predict when it will happen is impossible in the foreseeable future.

However, I don’t think this verse is only referring to natural disasters, but future problems and difficulties in general. In a church this size, one year from now, it’s likely that some of us won’t be alive. That’s the reality statistically. Every year people from our church die. Specifically, I might not be here next year. Will my wife be here next year? Will my kids be here? Will some terminal illness come or some accident happen that radically changes our lives? Will I lose my job? Will something happen in our church that will require us to close? We really don’t know what disasters might be coming.

Next year some of our lives will probably be much better while others’ will be much worse. Difficulties, problems, trials, even death—these are all inevitable for each of us. But we can’t predict when. We don’t know what this life holds for us. So our first point is grim, like so much of Ecclesiastes. Yet there are other points here that are not quite as grim.

Second, in verse five, *“You do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child...”* Put simply, we don’t know how life is created. We know some parts of it. Science knows more today than they knew 3,000 years ago. But no biologist or doctor can say we have it all figured out, that there’s no more research on human life that needs to be done because we understand it all. No, there’s so much more we don’t understand. We’re not just referring to how the cells divide and form the right body parts. This verse actually points to the spirit—or the soul—that comes into that new life. Where does it come from? We certainly can’t figure that out.

Some English translations split this verse into two different things we don’t know. Some say we don’t know the path of the wind, because the word “spirit” can also mean wind—which is

also true. Jesus taught in John 3 that the wind blows where it will. But still, you can pull out your iPhone and check the weather app, learning that the wind is blowing from the west. But if you actually go outside, it's more complicated than that. It sometimes swirls or shifts in different directions. We can't see it but we can throw something into the air to see which way it blows. There's so much we really don't understand. Whether this verse is talking about the wind or about the spirit coming into a child, either way, it's all true.

His next point expands this even further. The mystery is not limited to future events or how humans are formed. More broadly than that, verse five goes on to say, "*...you do not know the work of God who makes everything.*" We don't know God's work in creation. This sounds like what God told Job in Job 38:4, "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?*" This is now zooming out to consider all of this universe—everything God has made. We have no way of beginning to understand His power and greatness. It's obviously impossible that we could ever grasp, let alone imitate, what God has done.

The fourth thing we don't know is found in verse six: *...you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.*" We don't know what will succeed. His first point is similar, that we don't know what things await us in the future. The middle two points emphasize how little we know about how God makes things. Even though we don't know with certainty what will prosper, we still must move forward in life.

When I was in seminary about 12 years ago, I worked for a payroll company called ADP. It was my job to drive around to businesses and try to get them to use our company's services for cutting checks or direct deposits, withholding taxes and all the other details connected to payroll. I had a company car and a laptop—it was a good job. I had good training and worked with good people.

I was in Kansas City, so I did a lot of the training there, but also did some on the phone with corporate trainers. They also flew me out to their headquarters in New Jersey for a couple weeks. All of the trainers were watching to see if I understood the material and if I could communicate it accurately. They told me I was going to do great—that I would be successful and make a lot of money. They were wrong. I did okay, but not great. I barely got by for those two years.

It's difficult to know what is going to succeed. Just because someone does well in training doesn't guarantee success in the actual venture. That's why investors look at start-up companies with an awareness of how risky they are. You don't know if any of them will prosper or not. Everything can look right with the plan and the market—it all seems ready to succeed—but ultimately there are no guarantees. We just don't know.

This doesn't just apply to business; it's life in general. Parents, we don't know how our kids are going to turn out. We don't know how our jobs will go. We don't know what our financial picture will look like in a few years. There's so much of this life we just don't know.

As a church, we don't know how God will use any given ministry to bear fruit or reach people. Individually, as you tell others about God and share the gospel, you don't know which people are going to believe. In general, success of any sort is very difficult and sometimes impossible for us to predict or understand.

So these are four different ways the author is telling us that, as humans in this world, there is so much that is uncertain and just cannot be known. That could make us conclude, "Therefore, why try? It doesn't really matter. We're back to life being meaningless. How can we know whether anything we do is actually going to accomplish anything? After all, disasters could happen. A meteorite could hit us. So why try?" We're tempted to just give up, or at least to withdraw into a self-protective inaction, paralyzed by fears of the future. But that's not where the writer of Ecclesiastes goes. Actually, it's just the opposite. Because of this uncertainty, he actually says we should actively engage in life with wise risks. Even though we humbly realize our place in this uncertain world, we can still actively engage with wise risks.

Actively engage in life with wise risks.

Going back to verse one, we read, "*Cast your bread upon the waters...*" Have you ever done that? Have you ever thrown a piece of bread into a lake? Why? Ducks. I'm glad you said that. That's the only context I can think of for doing something like that. But I don't think he's talking about ducks, nor am I encouraging you to throw bread to ducks. Maybe gluten is bad for them, I don't know.

Commentaries and other sermons offer lots of different ideas about what the author had in mind here. It's helpful to add verse two to this. There's some sort of giving or sending or investing involved. Some have argued that when the river floodwaters were receding, people would throw grain into the water. Eventually the water would leave, then the seeds would germinate and grow and return a harvest.

Others suggest this refers to Solomon sending ships out in 2 Chronicles 9:21 as an investment, then a few years later they would return with gold and exotic things from around the world. But either way, there's sending with a risk involved. They didn't know what would happen to the grain in the river waters, and Solomon couldn't be sure his ships wouldn't sink or be robbed. Yet the sending meant that a return was possible.

But no one I read or listened to really applies this literally. What then do we do with this passage? I think it helps when we add verse two: *“Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.”* I think there is a connection here. When we think about our possessions and the gifts God has given us to steward, we don’t know if we’re going to have those a year from now. We don’t know what two years from now is going to bring.

So we’re called to actively steward what God has given us now. We are to hold things loosely rather than simply being protective. Remember the man in the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25? One servant decided to bury the talent he had been given then was strongly rebuked by the master for that decision. He did not use what had been given him so that it would multiply. Similarly, there seems to be a call to action here. Because we don’t know what will happen or what resources we will have later, we’re called to be generous and invest, wisely using what God has given us now.

Then verse three says, *“If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.”* So there’s some inevitability here. There are some circumstances in life which we can do nothing to change. Then in verse four, he implies that these inevitabilities do not leave us paralyzed with fear. He says, *“He who observes the wind will not sow...”* When the wind is strong, you don’t try to sow grain. *“...[A]nd he who regards the clouds will not reap.”* If we’re constantly looking in fear at the circumstances around us, it will keep us from ever actively accomplishing anything.

Again, this is proverbial wisdom. The author is saying, “If you live in constant fear of the circumstances in this world, it will keep you from ever using what God has given you.” As we actively engage life, we’re called to wise and bold stewardship without being paralyzed by fear.

In verse six he continues by calling us to diligence: *“In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand...”* Whatever you’re doing in the morning at your job, or whatever you’re engaged with in the evening, be all in, *“...for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”* There’s a call throughout this passage that life is filled with risks, but it should not keep us from actively living for God.

While I was preparing this sermon I came across this:

Following God is often about being a risk taker. Without willingness to take risks, Moses would never have gone back to Egypt. Elijah would not have faced the prophets of Baal. Esther would not have appealed to the king for the lives of her people. Daniel would not have prayed three times a day. David would not have stood before Goliath. Rahab would not have helped the Israelites. Peter would not have stepped out of the boat.

So throughout Scripture there are examples of people who through faith have stepped out in obedience. Knowing God is in control of all things, but not necessarily knowing how things would turn out, they actively engaged life.

What was most difficult for me in preparing for today—and I think for you in hearing this—is to think about how this is inherently Christian. We’ve already talked about how God knows things we don’t. It’s not hard to admit to anyone that there are things we don’t know. We can also say that practicing good stewardship and even taking wise risks is something with which others in this world would agree.

But where does the gospel of Jesus Christ fit into this? It’s true that all truth is God’s truth, so any wisdom we find in the Bible teaches us about Him and about His character. In fact, some of these same lessons were taught by Christ. He said in Luke 6:38, “*Give, and it will be given to you...*” He counsels His followers not to store up treasures on this earth, but to lay up treasures in heaven. We are to think with eternity in mind, realizing that long-term investing shapes the way we live here on earth. In the Parable of the Rich Fool in Luke 12, He says not to hoard possessions out of self-interest. In Matthew 16, He teaches that whoever saves his life will lose it, implying that efforts to hold on to this life are ultimately ineffective. However, when we realize there’s more than this life, or when we even lose our lives for Christ’s sake and for the sake of the gospel, our lives are saved.

I think what was most helpful for me, coming back to these six verses in Ecclesiastes, was something that isn’t a main theme—but it still is there in verse five: “*...you do not know the work of God who makes everything.*” I think it’s important for us to realize that he’s not just saying, “There are things in this universe that we don’t know.” He’s also saying, “There’s a God Who knows all things.” It’s not just, “Yep, we cannot figure everything out.”

Rather, it’s the foundational faith that drives everything we do when we believe there is a God Who has figured everything out. There is a God Who knows how to create all things. There is a God Who knows when disasters will come. There is a God Who knows what will prosper and what won’t. So that’s what gives the people of God faith and freedom to be able to step out and obey Him, following Him and living lives not dominated by fear. We’re not gripped with worry about what will happen. We aren’t thinking, “Can I control the way my kids will turn out? Am I going to be able to control how this job goes?”

Instead, we can say in faith, “God, I just want to follow You. I want to live this life using what You’ve given me for Your glory, because I know You’re there and that You’re sovereign over all things.” Jesus is ultimately our greatest example of this kind of confident faith. It says in

Hebrews 12:2 that He was thinking with eternity in mind. He was truly “living life backwards” and thus was able to risk everything—even giving His life in death. This comes after the part in Hebrews where we read about all the people who had lived life in faith.

It then says in Hebrews 12:1, *“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely...”* This is a call to action. *“[L]et us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith...”* That’s “the faith,” but it’s also “our faith.” We’re to look to Him as the model, *“...who for the joy that was set before him...”* With that in mind, living with faith, *“...for the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

I think it’s helpful for us to ask, “Where in my life am I showing that I treasure other things more than God?” These things can show up in the way we’re gripped by fear, trying to control all our circumstances. They’re keeping us from being actively engaged in life, even knowing there are risks. This line of thinking can be very practical. I don’t want to downplay the very practical nature of this passage. It could be applied financially. It might mean we should start a business or take a new job. These things matter to God. Everything in our lives matters to Him.

Or this could be applied to ministry. Maybe I’m to take a risk and start a relationship with my neighbor whom I’ve been burdened for and have been wanting to serve and point them to Jesus—but I haven’t because I’m fearful. Perhaps there’s another ministry venture that seems risky for me as an individual, or even for us as a church as we think about the long-range goals David has mentioned a couple times. We’re considering how people in this church can become engaged in healthy community together—encouraging one another, caring for one another, partnering together in mission to reach out into our community.

We’re also wanting to dream about ways in which our influence can expand—not because we’re great, but because we want to point to the greatness of our God. That might mean church plants or other forms of expanding into our community to reach more people. We’re also considering how we might more clearly reflect the diversity of the towns around us, or ways in which we can train up new leaders, or how we can invest in reaching unreached people groups. There are risks involved in all these things, but none of them will happen if we’re simply self-protective and wanting to be safe.

When we trust in a God Who is in control of all things, we are released from those fears. As I said in the beginning, in our uncertain world, faith in God frees us to actively engage in life with wise risks. Before I pray, I want to give you some time to think about how you will respond to this message. What is it in your life—a dream, a goal, a desire, a way God can use you—that you’ve been

holding back because of doubts or fears? Are you treasuring other things more than God? Have you been trying to figure it out or control it all? Instead, let me encourage you to pray, “God, give me faith to act and be used by You.”

Let’s pray.

God, we desire to leave today trusting You more, filled with faith that in this uncertain world we have a God Who is not worried about the future, Who is not unsure about how all this is going to work out. God, You are sovereign in Your rule and it is so sweet to trust in Jesus. May we then live and act and engage this life in obedience to You. Help us treasure You more than anything else. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

My worth is not in what I own
Not in the strength of flesh and bone
But in the costly wounds of love
At the cross

As summer flowers we fade and die
Fame, youth and beauty hurry by
But life eternal calls to us
At the cross

My worth is not in skill or name
In win or lose, in pride or shame
But in the blood of Christ that flowed
At the cross

I will not boast in wealth or might
Or human wisdom’s fleeting light
But I will boast in knowing Christ
At the cross

Refrain:

I rejoice in my Redeemer
Greatest Treasure,
Wellspring of my soul
I will trust in Him, no other.
My soul is satisfied in Him alone.

Two wonders here that I confess
My worth and my unworthiness
My value fixed - my ransom paid
At the cross

[My Worth Is Not in What I Own At The Cross by Keith & Kristyn Getty and Graham Kendrick]

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