

Diligence in Spite of Uncertainty

Ecclesiastes 11

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 - *“Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. ² Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth. ³ If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth; and if a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it shall 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 what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. ⁶ In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good.”

Background Notes

If we didn't have the divine revelation that God has given us in the Bible, we would not know what life is all about. We wouldn't know that there is life after death. We wouldn't know that there is a Heaven and a hell. We would not know that there is a purpose for living. We wouldn't even know how life began. We would have to conclude that we are no different from the animals. We just live, and then we die and are no more. How can we find meaning in life, if that's the way it is?

That's exactly what Solomon showed us in the book of Ecclesiastes. “Under the sun” - without divine revelation - life is futile and has no meaning. But in this book Solomon also showed us that with divine revelation from “above the sun,” life is not futile and life is not meaningless. Life has a purpose! We can live life joyously!

However, as we live our lives joyously, we need to remember certain things that Solomon also makes clear in this book.

1. Life is a gift from God, so we should live our lives to please Him, not ourselves. Joyous living does not mean a life of self-indulgence and hedonism!

2. Life is short, so we should take advantage of the days the Lord gives us “in the land of the living.” For example: Parents, take care to spend lots of time with your children now, because life is short. Before you know it, they'll be gone from the home - and you'll be moving to a retirement home.

3. God has not revealed everything to us. Although God has graciously given us divine revelation of future events and the big overall picture of the future, He has not revealed everything to us. We don't know the details of our personal futures. As Proverbs 27:1 says, *“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what the day may bring forth.”*

All three of these points should be kept in mind as we live life joyously before the Lord.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers should work hard even though the future is uncertain.

As we read verses 1-6, did you notice how often the phrase *“for you do not know”* is used? It’s found three times – in verses 2, 5, and 6. Solomon’s overall point in these verses is that we should still put in a good day’s work, even though God has chosen not to reveal our future to us. We don’t just throw up our hands and say, “I’m not going to work today because I don’t know how things will go.” That’s not what the Bible teaches!

These verses show us that we should work hard with the limited knowledge we have. We “cast our bread upon the waters” - we spread out our resources (v1). And we don’t put all our eggs in one basket: *“Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, for you do not know what evil will be on the earth”* (v2). Spread it out among seven or eight possibilities, because we don’t know the details about possible future misfortune or prosperity (v3).

And we don’t wait for ideal conditions before we start working. Verse 4: *“He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.”* The farmer who waits for perfect weather conditions will never sow - and never reap. God knows all the details about everything, but we don’t, so get going!

Verse 5: *“As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything.”* We should work hard at something in the morning, and maybe something else in the evening (v6). Maybe one will succeed, and maybe even both. But in any case, believers should work hard - even though the future is unknown and uncertain.

2. Believer should enjoy life, because the prime of life is fleeting.

Verses 7-10: *“Truly the light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to behold the sun;”⁸ But if a man lives many years and rejoices in them all, yet let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. All that is coming is vanity.⁹ Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment.¹⁰ Therefore remove sorrow from your heart, and put away evil from your flesh, for childhood and youth are fleeting. “Let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes...”*

Verse 9 is one of those verses in Ecclesiastes that have caused some Christians to conclude that the entire book of Ecclesiastes is only the natural reasoning of “a man under the sun,” and is not to be taken as truth. In this view, Ecclesiastes is only the inspired record of the faulty reasoning of King Solomon.

However, we are not presenting that view of Ecclesiastes. Throughout the book, there are many times when Solomon goes “above the sun” and brings God and His divine perspective into consideration - as he does in verse 9.

It's true that if we only had the first part of verse 9, we would have to conclude that this is not what the rest of the Bible teaches: “...*let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart, and in the sight of your eyes.*” That certainly doesn't sound like the kind of advice you want to give your teenager! But don't stop there. Read the rest of verse 9: “*But know that for all these God will bring you into judgment.*”

So, in the context, the overall point of the passage is that believers can enjoy life and should enjoy life while they can, but we must remember that we don't live our lives just for ourselves. We live for the glory of God.

Remember, the light of life is short. The darkness of death is right around the corner, even for folks who live to a ripe old age (v7-8). We cannot enjoy this present life that God has given us after we die, and that's the meaning of the end of verse 8.

We know from further revelation that believers will enjoy eternal life, but the point here in Ecclesiastes is that we only experience this present life that God has given us once. As the norm, the Lord wants us to take a positive and joyful approach to life. Yes, in the sovereignty of God, there will be problems and trials and sickness and the limitations of advancing age (and believe me, over-the-hill comes sooner than you think!).

So, while you're young, if you like football, play football. Learn to play tennis and golf, too - because you can do that longer! Travel and see the world, if that's what pleases you. And do these wholesome things while you're young, before the aches and pains and other limitations of age come along, because youth and the prime of life are fleeting. “*For childhood and youth are fleeting*” (v10).

But remember, while you're enjoying life, **put God first!** Our lives are a gift from God, we live our lives before the Lord, and the Lord Himself will review our lives. In whatever area of life you enjoy, you can be a faithful witness for the Lord. I've had some great opportunities to witness for the Lord while skiing - after all, you have a captive audience on the chairlift!

So enjoy the life that God has given to you - and be faithful to Him. I love Ecclesiastes! Believers should enjoy life because the prime of life is fleeting.

Practical Application

Apply the principles of Ecclesiastes 11 to spreading the gospel!

We've seen that the context of verses 1-6 is working diligently, because we don't know how things will go in the future. The principles given in these verses can certainly be applied to spreading the gospel. We should spread the Word in as many places as we can, even though we don't know what area will bring the most fruit. We should "cast our bread on the waters," knowing from Isaiah 55:11 that the Word of God will not return empty. *"So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it."*

And in application of Ecclesiastes 11:4, we should not wait until exactly the ideal conditions come along before we start to spread the good seed of the Word of God. That "perfect time," from our perspective, may never come. In the words of 2 Timothy 4:2, we should preach the word *"in season and out of season."*

In application of Ecclesiastes 11:6, we should sow the word in the morning and we should sow the word in the evening. Maybe there will fruit from one or the other, or maybe both!

So - apply the principles of Ecclesiastes 11 to spreading the gospel.