

Wise Footing Amid God's Mysteries Ecclesiastes 11:1–6

Solomon has now moved from the social scene to observing both the familiar and the unexpected. Casting bread, clouds releasing water, and sowing—all of them carry the idea of letting go, laying down, emitting, spreading, etc. Among the stuff of life that we need to let go and lay down would certainly include possessions, but also our stubborn insistence to co-rule with God and some falsified ideas of life itself should surely make the list.

What we find here—water discoveries, dark clouds, downed trees, wind, pregnancies, and seed sowing—these are images that would have drawn in those reading the Preacher's words. These are objects and realities that were part and parcel with life itself throughout Israel. And though I'll not dissuade you from last week's treatment that God has good purposes in establishing hard teachings and difficult texts (totally agreed) it's also consistent with Him to reveal Himself, His heart, and His will via what is recognizable. You see, the wisdom of God is not locked up simply in the work of the scholar, but the method of Israel's king would echo the I AM of the gospels, who also taught the crowds in ways that connected with their context. "*You are the salt of the earth...*" "*Consider the lilies of the field...*" "*I am the bread of life...*" If we're always digging for gold and never find any then we might be tempted to abandon the whole effort. Yet, God is kind to reveal the riches of His ways and His will to His people, and He knows how much we need and when we need it. Wisdom literature is precisely that based on its Author—who is altogether wise. Depending on His ongoing wisdom in our lives, sometimes He has us digging, and sometimes the gems are just under the top layer.

But Chris, what about today's text? To utilize Matt's language from last week, the demolition will now begin to slow down considerably. What's the LORD through this ruler of Israel been demolishing? —our pride, our expectations, our feelings of adequacy, our sense that we are in control. The Preacher has been tempering it all with the instructions to wisely receive life as a gift, not something to be mastered or manipulated.

Ecclesiastes is leading the reader to get to the place where hands are thrown up and hearts cry out, "I surrender! Guilty! I've played the fool, and now I realize You alone have what I need for a full and meaningful life!" And, once there, it's upon His wisdom that we begin to consistently build our lives, or to stick with the metaphor from earlier, God begins to unearth His priceless wisdom to us as we mine His Word. That's what we have here and that's what we'll encounter inside of the last two chapters of this book—some wisdom-in-concentrate; some direction that grounds the life of faith and gives the needed perspective to counter the folly in the world and in us all.

I. Lose your life with thoughtful generosity

Verses 1 & 2 are in the form of an imperative—do this, ***Cast your bread upon the waters***, followed by a motive clause, ***for you will find it after many days***. If we take this at face value, the metaphor attempted by Solomon falls apart just as soggy bread would in water. But, the bread is actually in reference to the corn used to make bread, a food item that has been a staple worldwide for millennia, and no less so in the middle eastern context of our text. So, to ***cast your bread*** was, in

essence, an act of releasing one's livelihood in such a way that there is some type of return—*for you will find it after many days.*

Of course, we're familiar with this thought thread from the New Testament. Jesus followed up the Beatitudes with these words, "Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."¹ This is not an equal reciprocation kind of generosity. Jesus is promising something more than a return of \$20 for \$20 given. That's too shallow and too dangerous.² When God's people give generously—even sharing their livelihood—then the Lord will repay that generosity lavishly.³ It's a unremarkable yet joyful scene described by Christ, as the common practice was when, at harvest, a person would hold out part of their garment and the generous soul would fill it until it overflowed. Here, the Preacher is arming us with a specific spiritual weapon for the constant tug and temptations to live a life of vanity—give your life away! There may not be immediate results in *cast[ing] your bread upon the waters*, thus the phrase *after many days*, but God will reward our kindness in His time. Down here or in heaven, there is no grasping at the wind when we let go of our lives for Christ's sake.⁴ When, Christ being at the center of our motives, we give ourselves away for the good of others—our time, our resources, our energies—then in reality, our loss becomes our gain.

If, from chapter 10 last week, *money is the answer to everything* to the sluggard who lacks wisdom, then the one with wisdom says, "No, it's not!" and in his/her dissention will back up those words by giving away what they value. After all, *for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.* As believers who live on the invisible God, why not be generous since the market may crash tomorrow, or since Christ might do as He's promised—come back in the clouds with His mighty angels in the glory of His Father?

You see, worldly wisdom bites its fingernails to the nub while building bunkers and barns for the impending disaster. But biblical wisdom, writes David Gibson, "instead throws open the windows and doors of our homes...[it] builds schools and hospitals and churches and sees rich Christians become much poorer than they might otherwise have been. Ecclesiastes-type wisdom, Christlike wisdom, grows believers who spend their lives on living in the world rather than living in the world so as not to die."⁵

And believer, here's a good way to test ourselves—evaluate and find things in this world that are most precious to us and either give them away, or do the kind of mental, spiritual, emotional scrutiny it takes to help you see whether or not that valued thing means too much or not. Gibson strikes again, pointing to the people who might say, "The future is uncertain, so eat dessert first," but verse 2 here would arrest such an assertion by teaching, "The future is uncertain, so give your dessert away."⁶

¹ Luke 6:38

² 1 Timothy 6:10, Hebrews 13:5

³ James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 203.

⁴ Matthew 16:25, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

⁵ David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards*, 126.

⁶ Gibson, 125. (I'm not, in any way, picking on anyone in particular that might eat their sweets before the main course. If you feel singled out, take it to the Lord in prayer. ☺)

The gospel flips people from living inwardly to living outwardly. That Jesus would dine with the pariah named Zacchaeus was beyond scandalous to the religious elites in Luke 19. He was a liar, a thief, and a traitor among the Jewish people. But to the praise of God's grace this social castaway was made a son of the living God upon meeting God's Son, "*And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.'* [9] *And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. [10] For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'"* Found and transformed by Jesus, the breadth of Zacchaeus' generosity was on display, giving **a portion to seven, or even to eight**. This numerical sequence in verse 2 is expressing an indefinite number, which is simply encouraging a robust and full expression of enthusiasm when and as we give from and of ourselves.⁷

Similar truths are expressed in the book of James. There, James tells us that wisdom from heaven is **full** of mercy and good fruits, the polar opposite from a life of self-absorption that snared the wee little man of Luke 19. It may have been joy unspeakable, or the freedom from guilt's prison, but the reward from God to Zacchaeus was sure. He lost his life with giant-sized generosity—and that was wisdom, but what he gained could not be quantified by any form of earthbound currency.

Does your life reflect that you've met the same person that pinpointed Zacchaeus in the treetops that day?

II. Content yourself with realities out of your control

[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.⁸

There is a specific path that I take in the early morning hours with my dog, Perry. And on that trail lies a tree that has fallen from across a large ditch. The first morning we encountered this tall, wooden casualty of age or wind, Perry seemed to be very interested. Subsequent mornings, not so much. But what I've noticed over a period of time is that Perry now navigates the tree without thought or blunder. A dog—without a moral compass—has accepted the reality of the tree lying in the place where it fell. But what's more to the point is I've caught myself complaining quietly about the city of Memphis' negligence. My dog's silence shames my heart's noisiness about a fallen tree. Could I call the city of Memphis? Yes. Would they come move it just for my daily walks with my dog? It's an absurd and self-serving thought. On the surface of things, it's a fallen tree over which I have very little control. I can't move it without help or a chainsaw. It's presence is a reality mostly out of my control, and one I need to accept, and from there, move on. ***If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth***—that's just the way it is. Many things have been presented to us as uncertain in Ecclesiastes, but now we're viewing life from a different angle—even uncertainty is unreliable!⁹ If that's not vintage Solomon in this book I don't know what is! And to the illustration, ***in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie***. We can't prevent the rain that brings with it the wind that knocks down the tree that will lie there until, according to the laws of physics, it is acted upon by an outside force.

⁷ Michael Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 160.

⁸ If interested, you can find R.C. Sproul's testimony on the Lord using this verse to bring Him to saving faith.

⁹ R.E. Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 107.

Wisdom is contenting ourselves with things we simply can't change. Again, we've run into a few of those things along the way in Ecclesiastes. We can't change the truth that we'll never get at life's whole picture—that belongs to God alone. We can't eradicate the world of injustice or folly, so we factor it in our day to day thinking and living. There's little fairness among the haves and the have-nots. Not a single person can live a loss-free, disappointment-free life. And our own death can't be cancelled or scheduled to suit our own timing. This book sets out to demolish our wrong-headed, bull-headed perceptions of what we think life is all about. The shadows on the cave wall aren't it!¹⁰ Our Father, who made this world and who patiently bears all who live in it—He kindly gives life to the fool-made-friend and is at work to grant a heart of wisdom to see clear and walk best. We must live with the wisdom of contentment amidst the realities which God the LORD has ordained in His world.

III. Avoid obsessing over what might or might not happen

[4] He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

If we're still the vein of giving our lives and sharing our livelihoods with others, which some scholars argue as the string that runs through all these first six verses, then the words *observes* and *regards* in verse 4 truly point to a foolishness. If we practice long inspections, maybe in the name of being careful, instead of doing what is required, then the fields of our lives will remain harvestless. How can we be generous at harvest if we have nothing to give?

I have good memories of Phil and Tracy Corbitt. For years they gave themselves. They served by teaching children and volunteered in several areas of church life. One way Phil served a host of us in this room is he knew vehicles—an understatement to be sure. He was nicknamed Dr. Phil at his job with a national part retailer because, according to witnesses, he knew the code numbers of the various car parts by memory. He could diagnose an engine problem from both far and near, and trustworthiness was his forte. But one small detail that bolstered my trust in Phil along the way was the state of his fingernails. Why? Be suspicious of the car mechanic claiming to know the problem but whose fingernails bear no grease. He was not only an expert, but he became an expert by becoming a practitioner. It was not simple theory to Phil, knowing only part numbers by heart. The one who is always observing the wind and regarding the clouds will often be seized by their observations. As they attempt to prognosticate, fields will remain unplowed and unsown. If we're always looking ahead, then we'll never look at what or who is close by. If we're always fixed on the future and all that could happen, then we'll misuse the gifts of the present.

Maybe Jesus had this text in mind when he was addressing the crowds in Luke 12, “*When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. [55] And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens. [56] You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*” They were able to interpret what was less obvious than the presence of God in human flesh standing among them! They were meteorologists who never

¹⁰ Plato's *The Allegory of the Cave*, where imprisoned cave dwellers have only known wall shadows projected by other people they can't see. The shadows are all they've ever known, so they are reality itself.

stood in the rain or enjoyed a warm breeze. They were mechanics who knew chassis and engine part numbers, but their hearts were never greased with Godward trust.

Many people are so obsessed with the success and not failing, that they fail to act. In this case, the eyes of the middle eastern farmer is foolishly fixed in the skies instead of wisely investing in the field. Gibson nails it again, “And what is worse than either success or failure in life is failing to live in the first place.”¹¹

IV. Meet limitations with diligence and God-ward trust

Gazing at the clouds and the wind, obsessing over what might or might not happen is the work of the fool. Uncertainty in life is the air we breathe. But *uncertainty* has an older brother named *limitation*. As we look at the beginning of verse 5, there’s little need to make the point that in Solomon’s day there was essentially zero knowledge of what was happening in the womb as a human developed there. But can we really assert that we’re closer with our 4D images in knowing exactly how the conglomeration of living cells is wed with a human spirit at conception? Verse 5 is unphased by modern technology because we still ***do not know the work of God who makes everything.***

And, if we can’t understand some of the most common events that happen in our world every day—such as the formation of life, happening 4 times every second in our world—then what makes us think we can know the billions of blueprints in our world, drawn up by God for the display of His splendor?

One call of Ecclesiastes is for us to surrender our maddening pursuit to decipher the exactness of God’s providence in this corner and that corner. We can be sovereigntists, love and champion the providence of God, and we should notice it under the rock and among the trees of life, but we will make some gains in wisdom when we finally view ourselves as mere mortals, and sinners at that; sinners, who will always, even in a fully redeemed state, possess holes and gaps in understanding. Our lives fall short of the glory, the power, and the infinite wisdom of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But not knowing God’s work, being uncertain of the future, having limitations at my right hand and left, are these sufficient reasons to sit on our hands, or throw them up in a resignation of disgust? No, we have the gift of life to live in God’s world, under God’s rule, and by faith, in God’s Son. Every day is an occasion to show His worth by how we manage our uncertainties and limitations. ***In the morning***, we’re to get up and ***sow [our] seed, and at evening withhold not [our hands]*** ... Some interpreters have taken the ***morning*** and the ***evening*** to be the early and late phases of life, arguing that God may cause the later parts of your life just as or even more fruitful, ***for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.*** That’s a good challenge to finish the twilight of life faithfully. Further, some have taken these references to the time of day as diversifying what you do with your life. In essence, don’t live entirely for one thing, because when it fails, you might fail with it.¹² Again, this seems wise.

¹¹ Gibson, 128.

¹² Ibid.

Whatever the precise meaning of the Preacher, we can conclude that it is wisdom to not be paralyzed or disabled by our limitations, but to meet them head on with diligence. The idle gazing at the heavens won't do. The deep dive into the minutiae of what we'll never understand is folly. But ours, because of Christ, is a life of trust in our heavenly Father. For, "*He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills, gives to the beasts their food, to the young ravens that cry. His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man, but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him, who hope in his steadfast love.*"¹³

Conclusion

Underneath the surface of each point considered today lies an important component of what it means to be a Christian. They are each and every one a call to fight and a call to die. To lose our life with thoughtful generosity is a declaration of war against indwelling greed. To content ourselves with realities out of our control is a good step in putting to death the desire to rule over ourselves. To avoid obsessing over what might or might not happen is to fight our inclination towards worry. And to meet our own limitations with diligence and God-ward trust is an act of slaying the belief that what we possess is all-sufficiency in knowledge and ability. In one sense we can tie all of them to Luke 9 when Jesus said, "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?*" The wise life is an abundant life marked by death to self.

But this text and the wisdom in it also reminds us of our deep weaknesses—living in our own sufficiency, worrying about what's to come, and possessing with a firm grip what we cannot ultimately keep. And it's in that sense that God's people can rejoice in knowing experientially what Jesus meant when He said, "*...behold, something greater than Solomon is here.*"¹⁴ This is the healthy, constant tension of life in Christ, isn't it? Depending wholly on Christ, who is greater than Solomon, to forgive our foolishness, while seeking out and asking God for wisdom to live generously, contentedly, all with diligence.

Will our lives prosper according to the world? Not at all. Will we be mistaken for fools, an odd kind of person with a misunderstood and misinterpreted peace? Yes we will. Will our generosity speak loudly inside of a *get mine/me first* culture? Assuredly. But God's wisdom has always baffled the world and changed her hosts. This is the way of the Lord. Let us pray for grace to take wise steps on the many paths He has laid before us.

¹³ Psalm 147:7–11

¹⁴ Matthew 12:42