

What to know when you just don't know

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[0 : 0 0] Now, we can turn in our Bibles to the short section of Ecclesiastes we'll be looking at this evening, Ecclesiastes chapter 11, and the first six verses. As we hear more wisdom from our preacher, here are things to know when you just don't know. Ecclesiastes chapter 11, page 678, if you're using a church Bible, where we read, Ship your grain across the sea. After many days you may receive a return. Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight. You do not know what disaster may come upon the land. 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. Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. As 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. 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. Amen. So all the way through, and if you've been here while we've looked at Ecclesiastes, you'll understand that the teacher wants to change our perspective. We all come at life from a certain perspective because of who we are, because of where we come from and our background, maybe because of the team that we support, or the work that we do, the age and stage that we are. We all have a certain perspective upon life, and the teacher wants to encourage us towards a different perspective than we might typically like to assume.

So we've heard him a number of times in this book say, here's how to consider what it looks like to live well. And what he does is he takes us to a gravesite. You cannot live well until you recognize the reality of death. He takes us to consider the future while confronting us with life's unpredictability.

And he's constantly reminding us about the reality of God while we live under the sun, and it can be so easy to forget the reality of God. Well, today's lesson, I think, is a really timely one for our age. We are the age and generation where there has never been so much information available to us, neither has there ever been so much choice. There's choice about everything, whether you buy a car, whether you're wanting to choose a restaurant for a meal, and there are so many ways to make a decision.

We can find out about detailed specifications. We can read hundreds and thousands of customer reviews. We can go to Instagram feeds. We can watch videos. And the list goes on.

[3 : 3 5] And what can happen, and maybe you identify with this, is that you can be paralyzed by the number of choices confronting us. If you ever go to the Sainsbury's cereal aisle, you get that sense of paralysis, if you're anything like me. Or, on the other hand, some people have that sense of being, experiencing the paralysis of analysis. I know I need to make a purchase, but there's so much information. It all just seems overwhelming. Is this the ideal, or is it this one?

We can suffer the fear of missing out, FOMO, but also the fear of better options. If I choose this, that means saying no to that. What if that's the thing? And that, I hope in a little way, points to a difficulty that the preacher in Ecclesiastes also reminds us of. The truth that we see less, we understand less, and we control less than we care to admit. So again, the question becomes, in that perspective, how do we live wisely? How do we invest our resources? How do we invest ourselves wisely when there are many things that we don't know? And so chapter 11, verses 1 to 6, is yet another humble reminder that while we don't know, God does, and God is in control. And that's always an invitation to rest. But there's also in this section, positive instruction. It made me think of Kevin DeYoung, his book on guidance. If you're ever looking for a helpful, practical book on guidance,

Kevin DeYoung has a book with a really long title, but the main headline is, I think, just do something. And if you read the book, you'll understand where he's coming from. But we're going to

think about that. So in this chapter, in these verses rather, you'll see that there are many things that we don't know. So let's consider three things that we do not know as people. First of all, we do not know the future. So we're going to go back to verses 1 and 2. Now, in the NIV Church Bible, it talks about ship your grain across the sea. But I imagine, if you've ever read this before, you're much more familiar with the idea, cast your bread upon the waters. So the NIV is like, I presume imagining that that could be confusing. Because what happens if you cast your bread upon the waters? You have soggy bread, and it sinks. We don't really understand where that comes from. Church history has always understood that as a reference to either trading by sea or to generous giving. The NIV has gone for the trading image of ship your grain by sea. So let me read verses 1 and 2 with the ESV, where it says, cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. Okay, but for now, we'll come back to that.

But notice the two things that are unclear. It's there in the ESV, it's there in the NIV. You may positively receive a return, or negatively, disaster may come, and you do not know. So think about investments. You know, we invest in a startup, or we invest in stocks and shares. The profit could go through the roof, or the company could go bust, and we could lose our money. We send in an application, we could get our dream job, or we could be forced to keep on looking. If it's true that success takes us by surprise, I think even more so, it's disaster that takes us by surprise. This week, I was reading an interview with the son of one of the many Titanic builders. Obviously, there was hundreds and hundreds of people involved in the building of the Titanic, and that boy spoke of his pride at watching the Titanic set sail on its maiden voyage. My dad helped to build that. Nobody expected the disaster that would come. We know, don't we, that the future is not certain, but often we live and act as if it is. Well, if I have it written up in my kitchen diary, then it must be fixed in stone. If I've got it in my phone calendar, then it certainly will happen. And we can often be surprised and frustrated when things don't work out. How would life be different if we really believed that we didn't know the future and we trusted God was in control? So, our author reminds us that we don't know the future. Then he reminds us, secondly, that we don't know the work of God. Look with me at verse 5. As 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. So, here in Scotland, we are doing really well with wind energy. Obviously, we have the natural resources there all over the place, whether that's onshore or offshore. Scottish wind companies are in some areas leading the way. We have learned to harness the wind, but of course we know that we cannot set the direction of the wind, nor can we predict where those currents are going to flow. When it comes to the unborn, we can see, and it's wonderful to see those high-resolution 3D ultrasounds, so we can see tiny, tiny babies as they are developing, but still nobody knows how life actually begins. We might understand the science, but why is it?

[9 : 35] Why is it that cells split at just the right time to create body parts and organs, and how is it that they fit together the way that they do? And so, the teacher uses these as just two examples to remind us that we cannot know, we cannot understand the work and the ways of God our Maker. Now, why is he doing that? He's wanting to give us the appropriate perspective as people, and I think so that as Christians, we would find contentment. Christian contentment comes when we can rest in the good and wise providence of God. As the old hymn puts it, whatever my God ordains, whatever my God plans for me is right. To be able to say that and mean it, that's contentment. It gives us freedom from trying to control and answer every question. Instead, it gives us the freedom to trust, and when we're living with trust and rest, then we're in a position to enjoy today as a gift, which is where he comes back to so often. So, we cannot understand the future, we cannot understand the work of God, and we do not know, thirdly, the way to guarantee success. Look at verse 6.

So, your seed in the morning and 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. Success is something that matters to us, isn't it? Even if it's our games and our hobbies, certainly with our projects, we want to do well at education, with our career, we want to see our church do well, have success in terms of growth, of maturity and growing numbers. Success matters. Ambition is good. Planning is good. Strategy is good.

Hard work is good. But our preacher wants us to remember there is no way to know this sure thing in life. Work on two plans, work on two projects, we'll never know, we'll either, we'll both come good.

Choose between two decisions, we will never know how the other decision would have panned out. We can't guarantee success over failure, because we do not know and we cannot control the future.

Choosing a job, buying a used car, planting a church, sharing Jesus with a friend. There are so many examples of things that we do and we're called to do, but we cannot guarantee success over failure.

[12:22] Again, as we consider that, and I'm sure we all recognize that, how do we feel about that? What we don't know can be unsettling sometimes, can't it? And so the preacher has this really realistic wisdom in the trenches for us. As people who like control and certainty, perhaps if we trust predictions, it can be hard to discover that's not how life works. So the question becomes, what should we do when we don't know these things? What do we need to know when we don't know the future? What success might turn out? We don't know what God's going to do. Because we want to avoid, and the preacher wants us to avoid paralysis that we were talking about. He also would want us to avoid fatalism, where we just shrug our shoulders and, well, say it doesn't really matter what we do.

We need to hear, what does biblical wisdom teach? And here we find there are three things to know. And the first of these is in verses 3 and 4, that we don't just sit there. When we've got decisions, when there's tasks to do, we don't just sit there. 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.

Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. We're invited, I think, here to picture a Middle Eastern farmer. Okay, so farmers, people who work the land, they know predictable signs. I'm guessing we would know these signs. If there are clouds and they're gray, they're going to bring rain. We know that when winds pick up, they can knock over trees. This, of course, matters for the farmer's work. When it comes to sowing, remember when people were sowing by hand, the ideal is when there's no wind. That way you can control dispersal. You don't lose your seed before it ever has a chance to take root. When it comes to harvest time, the ideal is no rain.

What's the lesson from the farmer's story? Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. Don't wait for ideal conditions, because life seldom works out that way.

[15:00] It's as if the preacher in Ecclesiastes is saying, avoid analysis paralysis. Don't be so busy reading the sky when it's time to be doing some work. When we understand that there's no sure thing in farming, and there's no sure thing in life that shouldn't stop us working. It shouldn't stop us doing.

Rather, we work, and we work hard and well, and we rest in the knowledge that our times are in God's hands. Verses 3 and 4 don't just sit there. It's realistic wisdom. Is there ever an ideal time for anything? It's never an ideal time for a career change, but sometimes it's really good to make that change. It's never an ideal time if we sit down and analyze it to move city, or to start or grow a family, or to begin a new ministry, or to tell your story of faith. You could always say, well, I'm going to put that off. I'm going to leave that decision behind because it doesn't feel ideal. But the teacher, I think, is saying to us, don't miss God-given opportunities while you're trying to read the signs, while you're waiting for a perfect moment. Rather, we work and we trust.

Especially when we think about work, we're told, you know, since the fall into sin in the garden, I remember God's words to Adam as the ground came under a curse, that work brings with it thorns and thistles. It brings toil and frustration. But at the same time, the Bible tells us from the beginning that work is still good. And so we should still use those opportunities, take those opportunities, and we should enjoy the gift of work and the tasks that are before us. To think about that parable, in Matthew 25, there was the lazy servant who didn't work for the kingdom and who didn't feel the conditions were ideal. He didn't feel his king was ideal, and he suffered loss. He didn't enter into his master's happiness. So Ecclesiastes tells us, don't just sit there. The second part of that statement, don't just sit there. Do something. Back to verse 1, cast your bread upon the waters.

So again, people through history, church history, have seen this either as, take risks in trading. Be bold. Be wise, but be bold. Spread your net. Trade by sea. Or, on the other hand, take risks by being generous. By being generous to the poor. But we do that understanding that we don't know, is this going to work out really well? Or is it going to work out badly? But the preacher says that shouldn't stop us doing and trying. So he says to us in verse 2, give a portion to seven or even to

eight. Be wise. Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Invest your resources widely. When it says invest in seven or even eight, it's that idea of going beyond completeness. The idea is the idea of being open-handed. Being open-handed when it comes to our resources. Hold loosely to our money and to our possessions. Remember what Jesus said, don't store up for yourself treasure on earth, where moth and rust destroy, where thieves break in and steal, but store up for yourself treasure in heaven. So be open-handed in that sense of holding loosely to money and stuff, recognizing it's not ultimate and it's not permanent, but also be open-handed in the sense of generous giving. As Paul calls us to, whoever sows generously will also reap generously because God loves cheerful giver. So you think about it. So he's telling us you're never going to know how things are going to pan out and there's never going to be an ideal. So our temptation, I imagine, will be, well, let me hold on to my resources. Let me hoard my resources until that ideal arrives. But know here, biblical wisdom is calling us to be open-handed with our resources regardless of the situation and the circumstances. That we're ready to take risks. Ready to take risks with our money. Being ready to give. Being ready to give to charities. Being ready to give to mission. It's not money down the drain.

It's investing in the kingdom of God. Wouldn't it be wonderful to meet someone in heaven? And it turned out that they were there because our giving, as small as it might have been, gave them the access to the Bible that let them know about Jesus. Or we supported the missionary who went and told them good news. Be open-handed with our money. Be open-handed with our time. Maybe that's the resource that's most precious and most pressurized on us. But there are going to be times where we have to be willing to exhaust ourselves to serve others. To serve and to show kindness. Whether we feel like it or not. Whether it's going to be received with great thankfulness or to be taken for granted.

[20 : 40] Be open-handed with our gifts. Especially as we remember as Christians that God gives each one of us a spiritual gift or gift for the sake of the church. That we would use those gifts generously.

not saying it's my gift or it's my time. It's my independence. If we remember as Christians that whatever we do for God matters, it's never a wasted investment. Remember when Jesus said, even someone who gives just a cup of water in my name will certainly not lose their reward.

Or what Jesus said in Luke 14, as he spoke to a group of people who loved hosting lavish meals for one another. He said, how about this? How about the next time you're thinking of hosting a meal, why not invite the poor? They won't be able to repay you. But if you do it for God, you'll be repaid at the resurrection. Whatever we do for God is never a wasted investment. So we should not just sit there, we should do something, and we should be open-handed with our time, with our resources. Go to verse 6. We hear him say something slightly different. 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. Notice the activity. Yes, you should sow. Yes, you should work. No, you should not be idle. You should take every opportunity when you can, even when we don't know if it's going to prosper or not, even as we don't know God's plan. But again, our preacher is saying, don't be paralyzed by that. Rather, invest yourself wisely and work hard and work well.

[22 : 39] Well, to go back to the New Testament wisdom book of James, that passage we read in chapter 4, if you remember it, how did he describe our lives? He used Ecclesiastes kind of language, our life is like a mist. Therefore, we shouldn't make those plans and imagine they're fixed.

You know, in a year's time, we'll do this or that, and we'll trade, and then we'll move, and we'll do this. Rather, we should say, if the Lord wills. That should be our heart attitude. We shouldn't presume our future plans are going to work out. But did you notice there was still a command at the end? It said, we should do the good that we are called to do. So even as we recognize life is fragile, even as our future is uncertain, we work hard and well for the Lord.

And to use this image of sowing, that would include, wouldn't it, sowing God's Word, to borrow from the parable that Jesus taught of the sower and the different soils, encourages us to tell people the Word of God, to share the gospel, even when we don't know the results.

What difference will it make if I read the Bible with my neighbor? What difference will it make if I have an opportunity to share my faith with my colleague? We don't know. But we trust, and we leave the results up to God, and we work in His strength. So we shouldn't just sit there. Now, we should do something. And the third thing to know, and we've heard it so many times from the preacher, is this, that God is in control. All of the uncertainty that we face, all the lack of control that

we experience is more than met by the goodness, the wisdom, the power of God.

You know, we don't know whether our giving or investing will meet with success or failure, but God does. Now, we don't know how to direct the path of the wind or how a child is formed in a mother's womb, but God does. We don't know which one of our plans will succeed, but God does.

[24 : 55] And so the response, the perspective the teacher is inviting is trust, to trust Him, to rest in His loving rule. And especially as the theme here is work, that we would then enjoy work as a gift, whether that's our vocation, whether that's what we're doing in our home, whatever it is, Colossians 3 verse 17, whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Remembering, too, the earlier lesson in the book of Ecclesiastes, the limits of work. As we work hard, we remember our work is not ultimate.

Our work does not define us. Success or failure, employment, unemployment does not define the child of God. Rather, we're always invited to work resting in the work of the Lord Jesus. We rest in His completed work, His finished work, His saving work. When we don't know any sure things in this life, here is the one sure thing we need. Jesus has completed the work of salvation, and to trust in Him is to be forgiven and to have eternal life. Let's pray together.

Lord, our God, we thank You that all of our lives matter to You. Especially we think about work and investing our money and our time and our resources. Thank You for reminding us that while we're not sure how things will work, You are the God who knows, you are the God who knows, and You call us to work.

You would call us to be wise in how we work, that we would seek wisdom from Your Word. We would seek wisdom from trusted and mature Christian believers and to pray. But You also call us to act.

You call us to act. You call us to act, to live for You in whatever You call us to today and tomorrow and every day of our lives. And so we pray that You would help us, help us not to be so unsettled or so paralyzed by uncertainty, but rather that we would trust in You, the God who is in control, the God who is good, that we would entrust our lives to You and then we would work at whatever You place before us, that we would work hard and we would work well. Lord, especially that You would help us to work hard in sowing the seed of God's Word. For parents that we would be faithful in sowing the seed of God's Word in the lives of our children and young people. For us as, who lead Bible studies or who preach and teach, help us to be faithful to what Your Word says.

[28 : 05] And we pray that even this week You might give us opportunities to share something from Your Word, something of the gospel that would encourage a believer, that would cause someone who's not yet a follower of Jesus to think about what really matters and to think about all that Jesus offers in the gospel. So help us, we pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.

And now let's close by singing the hymn, My Times Are In Your Hand. And we'll stand as we sing together. My Times Are In Your Hand. My God, I wish them there. My life, my friends, my soul, I leave entirely to You.