

Faith and its Reward

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[0 : 0 0] from Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiastes chapter 11, and then some verses in Matthew chapter 10. So Ecclesiastes chapter 11, the first four verses. Here we read.

Cast your bread upon the waters, or 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. 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. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. Then some words in Matthew 10, Matthew 10, 40 to 42.

Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet, because he is a prophet, will receive a prophet's reward. And the one who receives a righteous person, because he is a righteous person, will receive a righteous person's reward. And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water, because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. Amen. And may God add his blessing to these readings from his holy word. In particular, as we gather together in the Lord's name, we'll consider particularly these verses that we read in Ecclesiastes 11. You see the three headings on the screen there, the sermon itself, entitled Faith and Its Reward. Considering faith in uncertain times, we are living very much from a human perspective in uncertain times. But as we'll discover faith has its reward, even in the blessing that God gives to his people, even through those who persevere in faith.

And then thirdly, we'll be considering faith's courage, the courage of faith. We are told to trust in the Lord with all that we are. That takes courage, that takes the courage of conviction, that takes the courage of the Lord's people to remain true in following our Lord and Saviour.

It's Ecclesiastes 11.1-4. It was the Apostle Paul who wrote to Timothy, to Timothy's protégé. He wrote these words, that all scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. And here in Ecclesiastes, and perhaps one of the lesser read, one of the lesser considered parts of scripture, of God-breathed scripture, what we find here is very much wisdom to train the man and woman of God in that righteousness that Paul wrote off to Timothy, so that the man and woman of God might, as Paul said, be competent and equipped for every good work that God gives to you to perform for his name's sake. Now, at first glance, I'm sure, even at first glance, as we read these words in Ecclesiastes, you might think, well, how on earth does this passage fit into what Paul was saying about all scripture being God-breathed and equipping the man and woman of God in works of righteousness? I mean, what do these words say in Ecclesiastes 11?

[3 : 5 9] I mean, how does casting bread on water, how does sending portions to seven or eight, how does all that tie in with that wisdom necessary to be that man or woman of God and trained in righteousness?

And then these next verses about trees falling or watching clouds, and where does all this fit in with wise living, living to the glory of God? Well, if you look at the verses one to four of Ecclesiastes 11, what we might suggest here is that these divinely inspired words, these God-breathed-out words, refer to faith. However, to exercise faith, particularly in the light of two things.

First of all, in the light of the uncertainty of life, certainly from man's perspective, the uncertainty of life. And then secondly, faith exercised in the certainty of God's control over all things. None of us know what's going to happen tomorrow. None of us know what's going to happen in our lives, to our families, to our church, to our nation, to our world. We don't know what's going to happen one day to the next. That's been so clear even this year when we began the year 2020.

None of us could have envisaged the world-changing events that are a microscopic virus, has caused. It's brought so much social and economic and financial and health-related change that's happened in every country of the world. Unless we consider the changes that we're going to have to implement when we return to the church building and when we return, God willing, in early September. We have to confess that we would never have envisaged, never have expected such changes to have to be prepared for, even in the way that we're going to have to worship in the new normal.

But God is sovereign. God is in control of all things. God knows and God cares. Why? Because of that truth that we find in his word, because of that truth that we're to trust in him for what to you and to me are uncertain times. But to God, they're not uncertain. They're all under his sovereign care, all under his sovereign control. Even in our day-to-day existence, we don't know what a day will bring. [6 : 38] When we wake up in the morning, we have no idea what that day will bring. We don't know what happens when we're going to wake up tomorrow. If that's the case, do we simply live our lives in some kind of emotional and spiritual paralysis because of these uncertainties? Do we never leave the comfort zone of our own security in life? Or do we live by faith in the God who's all-knowing, who's all-seeing, who's all-powerful, the God of history, the God who's over all, the God who controls all things by his wisdom, by his power? How do we live in these uncertain times, these times uncertain to mankind, but utterly certain to God? How do we live? Well, these questions are certainly addressed in this passage that surely teaches us that, yes, while life is this hard, while life does throw up so many unexpected twists and turns that we could never envisage. Nevertheless, if you have faith in God, the one true God, if you have faith in the God who loves you, who cares for you, the God who sent his one and only Son for you, if you have faith in him, then you'll exercise that faith in God in full view of all the uncertainties that come before us. And you'll live by that faith, that faith that God has blessed you with. And you won't give way to the hiding away, you won't keep under wraps, as it were, that faith, even to be exercised in hard times. But you'll exercise that faith and confidence in the God, the Lord who leads you, the Lord who guides you, the Lord who directs you, the Lord who provides for you in all things. So what about then this passage before us, these short few words before us in the first four verses of Ecclesiastes 11. Cast your bread upon the waters, for you'll find it after many days.

Give a portion to seven or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. In fact, there's a faith in uncertain times. I mean, cast your bread in the waters. You might think more than just a momentary thought, you might think, what a strange thing to say. Cast your bread in the waters. I mean, you might think, well, if we take this literally, then what's going to happen? Bread's going to sink. You throw any kind of bread in water, that bread's going to get soggy, it's going to sink, and there's going to be no more trace of what you've cast into the water. And certainly not find it again, especially after many days. And then, well, the culture of the day when these words were first written by the author of Ecclesiastes. Cast your bread. Well, bread, of course, was the staple diet of the people then. Bread was important. Bread was precious. And to cast what was precious, what was valuable unto water that would seem anyway from one perspective to be so illogical, so meaningless.

Why? Why do so? Bread was the staple of life, the staple factor of life, as it were, even in our own day. And we see that in Scripture. When Jeremiah the prophet was cast into that bottle dungeon, as you read in Jeremiah 38, we're told that his enemies, the enemies that cast Jeremiah into that dungeon, because Jeremiah was speaking the word of God at that difficult time in Jerusalem, the people said that he's going to be put in a place where he'll starve to death when there's no longer any bread in the city. So we see bread was crucial to life.

The casting bread in the water, casting that valuable commodity to submerge and disappear, on one level, seems very strange, very strange advice, very strange command.

Isn't that exactly the point that we're seeing here? Ordinarily, it would be absurd to throw bread, to throw that which was precious onto water, whether it was the river or the sea or the ocean, and not just done, but with no expectation of ever finding it again. Ordinarily, we wouldn't do anything with anything so precious. Isn't this where faith comes in?

[11 : 38] Faith, as Jesus said, faith that moves mountains. Faith that believes that the impossible can be possible. Faith that enables the believer to be bold in the Lord, to be courageous, to do what ordinarily he or she might not even dream of being able to do. But doing what God has given you to do, the one who makes all things possible by the power of his word. It's that faith that God blesses

you with, that faith that looks, yes, looks to the uncertainties of life, but doesn't, as it were, backtrack, doesn't withdraw simply because man-centered reason tells you, sit back and do nothing for the Lord.

Faith is all about casting out. It's all about that casting out in faith, in trust in the Lord. Looking at what, to use another metaphor, looking at what seems an immovable mountain, by faith, casting that mountain aside. Jesus used that to illustrate on a number of occasions.

Mark chapter 11, for example, verse 23. Truly, truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and thrown into the sea, and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.

Again, in Matthew 17, verse 20. I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you'll say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.

Of course, Jesus is using metaphors. This is not literal. This is metaphor. You're not literally going to throw a mountain into the sea. You're not literally going to take a mountain and just cast it aside.

[13:33] Not at all. But you see what Jesus is telling us here. It's the same as casting bread into the ocean. By faith, you'll do what appears impossible. What man-centered reason says can't be done.

But in faith, you'll trust in your loving God, your loving Savior. And so, where you'll launch out in faith. Because when God tells you to trust in him, he says, trust in me.

Trust in me in whatever I ask you to do, whatever I send you, whatever I give to you in my perfect wisdom. It's for you and for me. It's for all of us to trust in him, to act upon that word, to obey him.

Faith then says, yes, cast your cares in the Lord. Faith says, trust in him. Trust in the Lord and even what seems impossible, impossible to man.

This is possible with God. Faith in our sovereign God. Faith in the sovereign power of God. Faith in the sovereign knowledge of God. Faith in God to be exercised at all times.

[14:45] Even, yes, in these current days of uncertainty, continue to trust in God. And continue to reveal that you have a heart that's right with God.

That you won't be afraid, even in these difficult and uncertain times. So be bold. Be bold in faith. It's the language that we see here as we look again at verse 1.

We cast your bread. Well, the word literally is send your bread or even, even shoot out your bread in the waters. It's that emphasis on a deliberate action.

Shoot it out. Just launch it out. You're doing the Lord's work. God's given you to do his work for his glory's sake. Whether you as an individual, whether ourselves as a congregation, he's given us work to do.

We'll act upon faith. Trust in him as you shoot out in faith in what the Lord has given us to do. Yes, these times are uncertain.

[15:47] We can be truly certain. And the God who holds the future in his hands. The God who is eternal. For whom the end is us, the beginning.

He knows all things. And if we're going to be serious about our faith in the one true God, if we're going to be serious about living by faith, then disregard the world of reason.

Disregard these voices of human-centered reason that, you know, urges you to be cautious. No. Listen to the voice of God that tells you to trust in him at all times.

If you watch any kind of sporting event, for example, no game is won by caution. Or certainly not absolute caution.

And no battle in war is ever won by remaining on the defensive. No famous discovery in any field of science, for example, has ever been made by those who've remained cautious, by those who simply have been confined by what already is known.

[16:59] And, you know, the wonderful thing for the Christian, for the believer in Christ, is that you know that God knows. That there's that absolute certainty in God.

God who sees all things, who knows all things. God who is there. God who and whom we can trust. God whom we rely on utterly.

So let's be bold in faith. And God calls you to, yes, even to move beyond your comfort zone.

Because these days that we're living in, these days that God has permitted us to live through, these days call for that faith.

Even the comfort zone of our past church experience. We've got to venture forth from. Because things won't be the same.

And things can't be the same. Now, of course, we remain under God's word. We remain under God's truth. And we're certainly not going to compromise on our principles, whether it's our principles of worship.

[18:04] We're still going to worship God and glorify God through word center worship and praise and preaching. We're not going to jettison the core truths of scripture.

We will change in our approach, in that approach to worship. There's all these factors that have come in because of the coronavirus restrictions. We're going to have to exercise worship through the social distancing that's required, certainly in these immediate days ahead.

There's going to be the limiting of numbers. We have to accommodate in our worship to that. The initial one service in the building per week, certainly initially.

We're going to have to adjust to that, adapt to that. Obviously, we're going to carry on with our two services a week. But initially, the one service in the church building, the other service by the year. There's going to be the absence of external singing. We can still sing in our hearts. But for the moment anyway, we've been certainly strongly advised no external singing because of the dangers of the spread of the virus through the external use of our voices.

[19:17] The use of live stream technology. The use of such technology to reach out in our worship to those who can't worship for all sorts of reasons in the building.

Of course, for many, for all of us even, this is going to be difficult to absorb. Surely we go forward in faith. Surely we trust in God that God has brought us to this particular time in history.

God has brought us to this situation. He's brought this time for every congregation that worships him in truth. Every Christ-exalting congregation. And so we seek, above all, to be that worshipping community, that fellowshiping community, and that missional community, as we continue to worship God, as we go forward in faith, as we continue to trust in God, God who's led us thus far and has done so for his sake and for his glory and for the good of those who are his.

So we practice faith. Faith's practice. But then, secondly, there's faith's reward, the reward of faith. Because when we look at the second part of verse 1, we're told that having cast or having sent, even shot out, or bred in the waters, having exercised faith, and we're told after many days, there'll be a reward, there'll be that finding.

I mean, aren't these words telling us that faith will be rewarded? Sometimes that can seem a little uneasy to those who know that God is blessed in all things, that God has gifted us all things, that nothing we do merits our salvation.

[21:05] But remember that we're directed by Scripture. Listen to the parable that Jesus taught about obedient faith. In another part of Matthew's Gospel, Matthew 25, we read of three men, three men who were entrusted with three different amounts of money.

They were given that money to invest for their master, while their master was away in a long journey. Two of the three, as it were, reached out in faith. They invested the money and their investments were rewarded.

But the third man who'd been given a sum of money, the third man was cautious. He refused to invest his money and instead hid it in the ground. When the master returned, without having been away for a considerable period of time, the first two men to whom he'd given that money to invest, they were commended for their courageous faith.

The money had been entrusted, the money that had been entrusted, had taken time to invest, but it had been invested. He'd returned from the investment by their action of faith.

Their master had said to them, well done, good and faithful servants. The third man was condemned for his inactivity. He was condemned for his lack of faith. And when you're bold in faith, when you're casting your bread in the waters, as it were, when you're boldly exercising faith, when you're doing the Lord's will and doing the Lord's will and work, it may well be it's a long time before you see the fruit of your labors, you see the reward of your labor.

[22:43] Even in these days we're living in, even these days that lie ahead, we might call these days that expect of us a faith adventure, stepping out into the, what we are saying is the unknown, into what's uncertain to our perspective.

We don't know, for example, if our live stream services that we're going to have, we don't know who they're going to reach. We don't know if they're going to reach the loss.

We don't know how God will bless these services and bless that means that he's put before us.

How are we going to know if the services that are going to be tuned in by others, will God use even

these services, these means to change the hearts of many by his spirit.

But we exercise faith. We exercise faith that God, having led us thus far, even in the various technologies that he's given to us to use, we trust in God.

And even if some of us were maybe reluctant to use, that means beforehand. We trust that in faith, God will, ruling over ruling, and that God truly will be glorified in what God has given us.

[24 : 02] And we pray that truly lives will be transformed through the means that God is blessing us with to further his kingdom. And of course, our faith adventures might seem like bread cast on the water.

It might seem at times as if it's just disappearing and no sign of achievement or blessing. But faith has been exercised in complete sincerity in that first seeking, seeking first the kingdom of God. If you've truly reached out in faith and not for selfish reasons, but for the glory of God, then we have that hope that we will see, that you will see the reward of faith.

And that really is what the remainder of verse 1 tells us. This expansion and this principle of exercising faith. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you don't know what disaster may come upon the land.

Now remember, this was written in the original Hebrew language. The cultural nuance that these words give us, seven or eight, is just a device that tells us, you know, that we've got to give generously to exercise our faith, as it were, in generosity.

[25 : 19] So, you know, this verse surely telling us, confirming that we must exercise faith and exercise it, as it were, generously.

Even in the uncertainty of these times, we exercise faith in the certainty of God's provision. Faith just doesn't sit back and be contented with just little forays into the exercise of faith.

we're to invest everything that we are in trust in the God who provides. And that's going to include deliberate acts of generous giving. We saw that this morning in Nehemiah chapter eight, the response of the people in Jerusalem after they'd been challenged in their faith, as they'd been, as they'd been grieving because of their sins, as the word of God had touched their lives, as it penetrated their hearts.

They were told that, yes, grieve for your sins, but be joyful. The joy of the Lord is your strength. And part of that exercising of joy was to give generously to others, was to show forth the love of God in giving to others.

And really, that's what we're seeing here as well. Faith is involved in our generosity of giving. When we give for the Lord's work, we don't know exactly.

[26 : 43] We don't know every detail. We don't know exactly where our givings are going to go in the Lord's work, but we trust that God will use the offerings that we give to Him for His glory, for His purposes.

If we're going to give to alleviate the poor and the needy, we might never know precisely how these gifts are used if we give even for local work, for missional work, if we're giving for work in parts of Africa, parts of the world, we don't know precisely how these givings are going to be used, but we give us the Lord has commanded us.

We give us the Lord has blessed us. Even the manner of our giving surely reflects our faith in the one who's given to us is all.

If we want to see the gospel flourish, even in the months ahead, even in our new format, even through technology, we'll even pray that the gifts that we give to enable that technology to happen, to be used, then we give in faith.

And we give in that faith and that trust that God will bless these means for the furtherance of His kingdom. So faith, yes, faith, exercise in these uncertain times.

[28 : 01] That faith, we pray, will have its reward and the blessing that God gives to you who exercise that faith, to you who give for the Lord's work. And I pray that, yes, God truly will bless that faith and they'll do so for your good and for His glory and for the benefit of others.

But of course, that faith has to be exercised. You have to exercise faith and do so often courageously, as we see in verses three and four our final point for this evening.

Faith's courage, faith's courage. Let's read again verses three and four. If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves in the air. And if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.

He who observes the wind will not sow and he who regards the clouds will not reap. This is a proverb that really tells us that man isn't in control.

Man can't control the clouds. He can't control these clouds that pour forth rain. Man can't control the wind that blows down trees.

[29 : 17] Bring it to the context that when this proverb was first written, the farmer, the farmer, you know, is the farmer going to say that just because he can't control the elements he better not sow his seed in case the rain washes the seed away?

Is he going to say that just because he can't control the wind he better not harvest the field in case the wind blows all his harvest away? I mean, obviously this is an illustration from agriculture but we can apply it in the life of faith.

Let's look at the illustration again just to emphasize that. One farmer looking to the clouds and he's not going to sow his seed because he's afraid the rain will wash the seed away. Another farmer feels that he can sense the wind and therefore he's not going to reap his harvest because of the risk to his crops.

What are we seeing here? We're seeing caution. Caution. Fear has ruined these farmers' crops. The seed hasn't been sown for one farmer.

The crops haven't been reaped for another. all because they've looked to the clouds and sensed the wind. Let's apply that to the life of faith.

[30 : 29] Just because we're not sovereign doesn't mean to say that you're going to remain where you are and not venture forth in faith and doing God's will where God leads you, where God guides you, where God directs you.

Yes, you might be tempted to think, oh, there's too much risk involved in exercising faith in these troubled times. You look to what appears to be, you know, such hindrances to the work that God's given us to do.

Some blockage, some mountain sized hurdle as it were to overcome. And you might be tempted to think, I just can't go forward in faith.

I just can't muster that faith to do God's will. How many times have we been in that position? You know, given that a particular task to do for the Lord, and we've hesitated, we've pulled back, we've looked to the clouds, we've sensed the wind, as it were, and we've been inactive in exercising faith. Faith in the one true God requires courage to exercise. You know, when Joshua was about to lead the several million Israelites to cross over the Jordan, we were told in Joshua 1 he was afraid.

[31 : 49] The people were afraid, he was afraid. But God called them to act, and God said these words, do not be afraid, be courageous. In fact, three times God called on Joshua to be strong and courageous, and God gave him that assurance that God would be with him to lead the several million people to cross over the River Jordan to the promised land.

see, the courage of faith was required there, and the courage of faith, exercising faith by courage, the courage of faith still needs to be exercised.

Yes, when we think that the road's too steep, or the way is just too difficult, God's calling you to be strong and courageous, not to be fixed on those things that appear so menacing and yet are under the control of our sovereign God.

So when you are afraid, you are afraid of such and such a thing, or even such and such a person, even those things that you think are going to prevent you from moving forward in faith, will you look to the, not to the clouds, not to the wind, but you look to God, and you trust in God, God who's led you this far, God who's led us this far, will you trust in the one who loves you, trust in the one who's sent his one and only son, who sent him for you, so that you might know his power in your life, so believe and keep on believing.

Now, of course, even to the present time, the road ahead, as it were, is fraught with danger, and, well, the virus that's caused so much destruction, it's still there, it's still present, but we move forward in faith, believing that yes, in these times that God has a plan for each one of you, God has a plan for this congregation and every other God-fearing congregation, God has a plan for each one of us, so God commands us, God commands you, be an overcomer in faith, in the courage of faith, even as you move forward in faith, trust in him, trust that God will bless you, trust that God will be with you, as he's promised to be with you, trust that even as you witness for him through these difficult and dangerous times, that God will never leave you, never forsake you, you can testify to a living Lord Jesus, a living saviour, whom you know, and in whom you have that full security, as we were thinking this morning, that God is our refuge, and our strength, will you believe that, trust that,

and go before him with that, trust in your heart, you know that he's watching over you, watching with you, keeping you, providing for you, leading you, yes, as we close in these days when churches are adapting, we'll continue to adapt to this new normal, all the changes necessary in this new situation that

[35 : 06] God has given us, will take courage, be strong in the Lord, and the power of his might, be strong, be courageous, trust that he will not leave us, he won't forsake us, so look forward then with confidence, that confidence in him who goes ahead, who prepares the way, he knows the end from the beginning, he's not going to abandon his church, he's not going to abandon his people, so don't look to the clouds, instead of looking to the clouds, or instead of sensing the wind, the wind of menace, look to the saviour, and look to him with that courage of full obedience, loving obedience, obedience to God, look to him, look to the father who sent the son to the cross, look to the son who went for us to that cross, look with that courage, even that courage of self-sacrificial love for our saviour, who gave himself for us, look to the Lord

Jesus, who endured the shame of the cross, look to Jesus who bore our sins in himself, look to Jesus, look to him who went to the cross with that courage, and when your courage falters, you'll be strengthened to trust in him, strengthened to trust in the one who with that courage of self-sacrificial love for you, gave himself for you, as you look with courage, the courage of faith to the Lord Jesus, be strong, and move forward in delighting to do God's will, delighting to do what God gives you to do, delighting to serve him, delighting to do so in faith, and when your faith is weak, call upon him, ask him to strengthen that faith, so that you will move mountains, so that you will cast your bread in the waters, and after many days find it again with that reward of faith.

Amen, and let us pray. The Lord our God, you who bless your people with faith, may it be that your people, your children exercise that faith, faith in you, faith in your promises, faith that trusts in you in all things, even through these dark and difficult days.

Lord, we come before you weak in faith, may you strengthen our faith, may we know that power that you give to us, to trust in you for all things, even in these days that we are given to live in.

Be with your people everywhere, be with your worshipping church in every corner of the world. May your people rejoice in you, even in the promises that you give of everlasting life for all who trust in you.

[38 : 11] Lord, go before us as we continue to worship you now, and we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to close in Psalm 62, Psalm 62 verses 5 to 12.

These words we pray that very much follow on from what we were thinking in relation to exercising faith in the one true God. Find rest my soul in God alone, in him my hope is ever sure, my safety, fortress, sheltering rock, in him alone I am secure.

62, 5 to 12 to God's peace. I rest my soul in God alone, in him my hope is ever sure, my safety fortress sheltering brought, in him alone I am secure.

I am secure. I am secure. My honor and salvation press on God, my rock and my deport. heart, O people, trust in him the grace, to him adore, pour out your heart.

[39 : 58] heart. The low man is but a breath, the high poor man is but a light, within a balance side by side, they come to nothing but a sign.

do not seek after wealth by force or triumph in will not and pain.

And even though your roots increase, set not your heart upon his name.

God has spoken I have heard that you are strong and loving Lord each one according to his ease. You will assure and be rewarded. Let's close in prayer.

[41 : 45] Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

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Can see I have part and come happy alreadyases again up wait