

You never know

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[0 : 0 0] to near the end. Next week will be the penultimate sermon in Ecclesiastes, but we've got another couple after tonight. But we are into chapter 11, and we're only looking at the first six verses. Some of these verses are quite well known, and I pray that the Lord will speak to us from it. They are very challenging verses, and I found them very challenging as I was preparing this this week. So Ecclesiastes 11, the tone of the teacher, changes when you come to chapter 11. So let's read together. Ship your grain across the seas. I'm reading from the NIV 2011.

Ship your grain across the seas. After many days you will receive a return. Invest in seven ventures. Yes, in eight, you do not know what disasters may come upon the land. If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, 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. I love those verses. Those verses are very challenging indeed, an encouragement to really step out with the Lord, and we're going to look at those verses in a moment, but let's stand and we'll sing. It's a reminder of the presence of the Lord. Bees, mind you,

I'm not actually heading down to Blackpool. I love my flock too much. I'm not skiving down to Blackpool. So anyway, I'm preaching next week, but the following week we have a visiting preacher who's somebody who's applied for the pastorate here, and you can be praying for him. But over these next couple of weeks, if you want a visit from me, just say, John, I've not seen you for a wee well, pop in and see me. There's nothing more frustrating for me as a pastor, rocking up to visit somebody, and they don't want to be visited. It's just a waste of time. So honestly, I will crawl over a broken glass if you say, John, come, I'd like to see you. Yeah, I would welcome that. So I throw that out to you, especially over these next couple of weeks, because the following week I'm on holiday.

I don't know if Andy's zooming in, so I'll try and see the camera. If you are, you're great to have you with us. I'm not too sure if it will do that more this evening as I put that appeal out. If you can't make it, that you can maybe zoom in, that that would be great as well. But let's just ask for the Lord's help now as we come to his word. Father, with your word open before us, we pray that the Holy Spirit who granted us life, Lord, would instruct us this evening. So Father, lead us and guide us.

Lord, if there is a challenge here for us, Lord, give us ears to hear what that would be, and give us faith. Lord, it might go with that challenge. Lord, help our unbelief, we pray, as we recognize we've just been singing that no work is too hard for him. So Father, we remind ourselves of that great truth. So Father, be with us, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So we're continuing a series of studies in the book of Ecclesiastes. You know, I won't go over everything that we've looked at before, but the teacher, maybe Solomon, we do not know, has looked at everything under the sun and thought a lot of it's vanity. Things don't make sense. Things seem cruel. Things seem confusing. And we've dealt with a lot of them before, and really only in the gospel do things make sense. Now, up until now, up until chapter 10, the preacher's been quite cautious. Oh, life is scary. Life is difficult. Just watch what you do. It's meaningless. What's the point? And it comes across as quite kind of, just careful now, careful what you're doing. Now, when you come to chapter 11, especially in these six verses, caution is thrown to the wind. And you come to quite an exciting portion of God's word. Here is a wee kind of image. Who's that? What regiment is that? The SAS. That's the SAS.

[4 : 23] I'm sure you know that. Who dares wins. That is basically what the teacher is now saying in these six verses. He's asking you to throw caution to the wind and to begin to do daring things in many ways for God. In other words, who dares wins. That would be a great motto for every church, not just for the SAS, but for every church. Who dares? I mean, we are the creator of heaven and earth, an almighty God. We say we praise God much for his mighty power, an almighty God, and yet we don't often dare great ventures for God. And that is what this passage is all about. And he's basically asking us, the teacher is basically, these first six verses is that. Adopt that motto, believer, who dares wins.

And in this passage, he comes up with a few pairings. So I want to just look in the moments that remain at three main things. But that is the main thrust of the passage. So first of all, he looks at bread and water. And in this analogy, these two things, he's basically asking us to be bold. And the first two verses of Ecclesiastes chapter 11 are quite confusing, because depending on the version that you're reading. If you're reading an older version of the NIV, they read very different from the version that I read. So I'll read to you the older, earlier version of the NIV. Maybe you're using ESV or something, I don't know. Cast your bread on the waters, and 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. That's quite a well-known verse for Christians. Maybe you've heard a few sermons on that. My version says this, ship your grain across the sea, for after many days you will receive a return. Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight. You do not know what disaster may come upon the land. Now, how do we understand these two verses, depending on the version that you read? There are basically three main interpretations of these two verses, depending on the commentary you use or the version that you read. The first one is this, philanthropy, give to others. That's how sometimes this verse has been translated. That's certainly the old NIV, how that would be understood. And he's basically saying, give to the poor, and as you give to the poor, you will receive a blessing in return. The commentators draw a comparison between the old NIV and the Arabian proverb, which may have existed around about that time. It says this, do a good deed and throw it into the river, and when this river dries up, you will find it. In other words, do a good deed, throw it into the river, and when the river dries up, you will reap a benefit. And if that's a true Arabian proverb, the old version of the NIV basically says that. Do good to those who need help. Jesus said something similar, whether that's what that means, but the principle is very biblical. Jesus says, give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. So that is true. Whether that's what that verse exactly means, we do not know. Whether it's philanthropy, give to others, Jesus says, whether this verse in saying it or not, and it will be given to you. So there's certain amount of truth in that.

And similarly, verse 2, if you're looking at the older version, talking about portions of seven or eight. In other words, if you give seven portions, that's the height of generosity. To give eight portions was to go even beyond that. You are really generous. You're given eight portions to those in need. And it says, because you do not know what disaster may happen on earth. Well, Valencia, that type of thing.

Look after those. You don't know what's going to come. So look after those who really need help. Give seven, but even go beyond that. Give eight more than the height of generosity. And in biblical times, it was customary for family to share feasts with neighbors in need. And I'm sure this is happening in Valencia. But let me remind you of Nehemiah 8. Nehemiah says, go enjoy choice foods and sweet drinks and send some to those who have nothing prepared. For this day is holy to the Lord. Do not grieve for the joy of the Lord is your strength. In other words, you party on, but there'll be others who don't have anything. Give to them. So that is one translation, casting your bread or giving a portion to those who need it and you will receive a blessing. The other interpretation is possibly hard work. It's just encouraging us to work hard. And when it's talking about casting your bread on the water, it's a kind of agricultural, the business of agriculture. And basically refers to throwing bread or seed onto the water. The proper time to sow that seed was basically an annual flood of the Nile at a certain time when the water was just right. When it's very fertile, you throw your seed on there and you know that. And when the water dies down, the seed's been well watered and up it comes.

[10:20] In other words, you don't just sit with your arms folded and asking the Lord to bless. You work hard. You know when is the right time to sow the right seed. And you do this. Charles Bridges says this, the time for sowing the seed is just when the waters are going down, leaving a rich soil in which the seed apparently is lost. Where's it gone? But then it produces a luxuriant harvest. So that can make sense as well. Not only give to the poor, but work hard. And after many days. In other words, a farmer sowing his seed and he will receive a return. Then the more likely interpretation is the one I'm about to give you. But those other two are still biblical. And it's basically engage in maritime trade. The newer version of the NIV talks about ship your grain across the sea. How many of you have that version? Okay, right. We're in good shaky ground there. But a lot of more modern versions have. That's probably more like it. Ship your grain across the sea. And after many days. In other words, and see what happens. Who dares wins. It's basically that. Don't you? Who dares wins. Ships, when they go on a commercial voyage, they take a while for one day and come back the next. They're away for months. Solomon did this. This was the case in Solomon's time. One Kings 10. The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver, ivory, apes, and baboons. And if Solomon's a writer, he's speaking from experience.

Invest. Invest. Ship your grain across the sea. Because three years later, you'll come back with all these baboons and you name it. We've had friends with us over this weekend. And we've really enjoyed playing board games with them. We never played this game. But here's a game called, then you know what that game's called. Have you seen that game? It's hard to buy. They don't sell it now. It's called the business game. We really like it. It sounds very dry and dull, doesn't it? The business game. But basically, those wee circles that you see, those are mines.

And they produce, depending on the throw of the dice, they produce silver. Not real silver, but wee tokens. Anyway, plastic. And your task is to make so much money. And so you can travel, you can take that. It's worth so much at the mine. But if you travel on the road, the white roads, or on the wee blue road, canals. So you get a barge, or you get a lorry. And then you take them to the wee pink houses, the warehouses. In fact, if you stick up the next image. So basically, you've got that, the lorry, the barge. And go back to the other one. Sorry, I'm making you work here, Daniel.

It's worth so much at the warehouse. But then the most money is made if you ship it across the sea to these other ports. And it's transferred them to dollars. And that is more lucrative. But it costs to hire the barge. And it costs to hire the ship. And it's more expensive. And there's more risks.

And depending on the cars you turn over, you could lose all your cargo. That's basically what the teacher's saying. He says, don't just keep your stuff at home and think, well, just keep this way.

[13 : 52] We'll look after it. Make sure nothing happens to it. He's saying, invest in it. Do this. And you could make more money. You remember Jesus said the same thing when he gave his talents.

He gives one ten, one five, one two, a one, or whatever it is. He gave one five, two, and to another talent, he gave one. And then he goes away. The man says, you gave me five. I invested in them.

And I made five more. Well done, you good and faithful servant. Same with the second one. The guy who got the one talent. Whoa, better not lose this. Better keep it. I knew you were a hard man.

I buried it. I kept it safe. And I was afraid and hid this. The Lord says to him, you wicked and lazy servant. So you knew I harvest where I have not sown and gather where I have not scattered. Why then did you not put your money on deposit with the banker so that when I return, I would receive it back with interest? And then this worthless servant is thrown out. In other words, Solomon here, the teacher here is saying what Jesus is saying. Invest your time and talents in the service of God.

Don't just keep them. Don't just hoard them up. And it's an encouragement to, because it talks about verse two, invest in seven ventures and even in eight, because you simply don't know what disaster or what success might come on that game. You think, am I going to risk a barge? Am I going to go? I'll go with the ship. It's going to cost me more, but the rewards are more. You don't know whether a disaster is going to come or not, but you do this. And that's what basically the Lord is saying here, is to step out, do the big thing, the big thing for God. So which one of these three is right? I don't know if you need to choose. The three of them are good. The three of them are biblical. Give to others and it will be given to you. Think of the needs of others. Work hard. Sow your seed. Work hard. Look to the Lord.

[16 : 02] Don't just pray. Work, work, work. And also, take risks, shall we say. You do not know what will succeed, this thing or that. And that's what we're to do there. Secondly, there's another two things he mentions here related to the topic we're looking at, the wind and the clouds. And in this, he's talking about not only be bold, invest the time and talents the Lord has given you, take those big steps of faith, but be positive.

So he says in verse three and four, if clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Where a tree falls to the south or the north, a place where it falls, it will lie. Whoever watches the wind will not plant. Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. In verse three, he uses images of clouds and a falling tree. Now, we don't like when bad things happen. We don't like the clouds. We don't like the rain and accidents that happen, trees that fall over. We like the same. We like it to be safe.

One of the things when you become a Christian, your position before God changes. You become a child of God, redeemed, reconciled. But what happens is when you become a Christian, you carry your temperament into your Christian faith. And Christians basically, people fall into one of two categories, either a risk taker or risk averse. Some folk are scared of the day they haven't seen, and others are, let's give it a go. And in the church, you have both types of people. They go, oh, I don't think it'd be wise to do that. I remember being a pastor in a church with two elders, and I remember thinking at the time, I had one guy, and every time you suggested anything, he would say, the trouble with that is, he just, he sat me his foot on the brake. It didn't matter, here we're, I think we should go here. Let's go now. Foot on the brake. So I got this other elder who would sit me his foot in the accelerator. He just, he just thought in nothing that the pitfalls, what pitfalls? Let's just go for this. So I had the two of them in the hope that they would cancel each other out, or they would meet somewhere in the middle. And I think that that's really the case. Verses three and four basically warn us what will happen if you don't obey verses one and two. If you don't cast your bread in the water, if you don't take these big risks for God and step out in faith, nothing will happen. And that's basically what's happening here. To show this, he talks about a farmer standing out in his field. The clouds are heavy with rain and a tree has fallen.

There's nothing the farmer can do about either. He can't do anything about the clouds, and he can't do anything about this tree that's fallen. But the one thing the farmer can do is when he will sow his seed and harvest his crops. But this particular farmer's just standing there, and he's just watching the wind or the clouds, and he's going, I'd like to do something. Well, that cloud looks as if it's going to come. I'll wait for a more opportune time. And if there's a time to sow and a time to do this, remember in Ecclesiastes 3, this farmer doesn't seem to know when that is. So he's just kind of looking at the clouds and going, this is scary. So I don't think I'll do this. And there's a tree there and so forth. And he's trying to guess when he might safely cast his grain or his seed or whatever. And he really doesn't know. He intends doing this. He wants to do it. Don't get me wrong. He's keen to do it. He knows he should do it. He's a farmer. But he's constantly waiting on better conditions, which may or may not arise. And here is some good advice.

Sometimes we can analyze, analysis to paralysis. I'm a bit like that. I must confess, I take great ventures. But I like to know that we're not doing something foolhardy. And this is what he's saying. He's procrastinating. Maybe not just now. Maybe we'll do it later. Maybe when things are better. But now is not the time. And there's always a plausible time, an excuse for delay. Maybe the weather will be better tomorrow. And as long as he keeps doing this, nothing will happen. Nothing of any worth. The planting time. He's looking and he's thinking, well, it's dry. Maybe the seed will dry up at harvest time. Maybe a storm will come. And the simple truth is this. We don't know. There are no guarantees in life. Time and chance happen to all. But if you do not sow, you never reap. That is basically what's happening here. So here he is paralyzed. He is procrastinating. And these two things will always get us into all sorts of trouble. So beware of looking at the wind, looking at the clouds. It gets us into all sorts of trouble. Thirdly and lastly, you do not know.

[21 : 30] This is how he finishes. So he says, do this and you will reap. Stop looking at the clouds. Stop being negative. Start to take leaps for God. Because thirdly, you do not know what will happen. Verse five. As you do not know the path of the wind or how the body is formed in the mother's womb, you cannot understand the work of God, the maker of all things. Sow your seed in the morning and the evening. Let not your hands be idle. For you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. So if verse one and two are to take these big steps, to cast their seed, to give or whatever, verses three and four are about what will happen. If we don't do that, verse five uses the analogy that we don't know what will happen compared to what God knows. Verse five. You do not know the path of the wind, how the body is formed. In other words, we do not know what God might bless. William Carey was a bit like that, wasn't he? He attempted great things for God.

He expected, sorry, great things for God and therefore attempted great things for God. You do not know how God will work. We looked at this this morning with Nicodemus, the Holy Spirit. We cannot predict how he will work. He could suddenly, that God could pour out his Holy Spirit next week and people could be saved in a very unexpected way. Did I tell you about the guy that, I think I told Richard certainly about the pastor that preached through Romans. Did I tell you about that? Preached through the whole of Romans in Northern Ireland and somebody got saved and he said to him, what part of Romans was it that the Lord spoke to you with? He goes, that wasn't it, Romans. I went home and I watched Little and Large in the telly and one of them's a Christian and shared his testimony and became a Christian and he said to me, he says, the Lord, the pastor said, the Lord has his ways of keeping you humble. He's preaching through Romans in Little and Large, save him. You simply do not know how the Lord is going to save, how he's going to, through the most wacky of ways and the Lord can do this. And sometimes we think we need to be experts. We need to make sure the wind is blowing in the right direction and everything happens. We simply do not know how God will work. And that's what he's mentioning here. And we should be amazed at this. And the analogy that he gives here is the seed in the morning and so forth. You don't know whether this will succeed or that or how the wind will blow. The other thing is the womb. As you do not know how the body is formed in the mother's womb. Well, we know a lot more than Solomon knew. We kind of hope what's happening now. Oh, baby, don't know how that happened. We know everything down to the DNA.

We know exactly how they're formed and what happens and so forth. But the very fact that we know should still fill us with wonder. As I said this morning, my daughter, you never think of your own kids having kids. Well, I don't anyway. I've just got my kids having kids. How does that work? Anyway, just amazing. And when a wee baby arrives, yeah, we'll be pleased. And you've been there before me.

We should marvel at the fact that God works in ways that we cannot imagine. He can do this in our own life. We don't need to be fearful or anxious. We need to step out in faith with him. So rather be paralyzed and do nothing, we need to consider God. Look at him. Look at the wind and see that how he works in ways that we can't anticipate. Look at the marvel of things that he does. Very creative.

Things that we don't know, we don't understand, but we trust in him. So these six verses here are so encouraging. After the negativity of the first 10 chapters, you come to chapter 11. And it's almost as if it's a different person speaking, different person writing. Who dares wins? If you're living the rest of your life, it's not all a waste of time. Step out with the Lord. Live boldly. Live creatively.

[25 : 50] Try something new. Be a spiritual entrepreneur. Try something because you simply do not know what will work and what will not work. But one thing is for sure. If we do not sow, we will never reap.

Never reap. And I used to always say to folk in churches, why don't we try this? Nobody's going to die. I've mentioned this to you. I always say that. Let's try it. What's the worst that can happen?

They might fail, but we might get egg in our face. We might feel a bit embarrassed, the person that suggested it. But let's try it. Let's give this a go. It's a good thing. And who knows how the Lord will bless it? Give the Lord our five loaves and two fish. Work hard. Have faith. Step out in faith with him. I wonder in your own life, are you ready to be risky for the Lord? Are you ready to step out in faith? Wondering how he will work in our lives. Does that make sense? Big challenge. A big, big challenge. This is, I want this to be my life. I want to live my life like these first six verses and know just kind of, oh, look at the rain. It might not work. Oh, the problem with that is.

But to see our God is bigger. And yes, we don't know if it will work. There's no shame in that. But it might work. So let's give it a go. Let's step out with him. Let's stand and sing as we close.

To him we come.