
Uncertainties

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

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In this world, under the sun, there are no guarantees. We always live with a certain amount of a. For certain, all things are uncertain.

First, that statement is true only to the degree to which it is outside the promises of God.

Second, that statement is true only to the degree to which fallenness and the curse interrupts the normal, natural, God-designed flow of order.

If we live with no guarantees, then what should we do? What should we expect? How do respond to life, work and ministry when there is always an element of risk?

The Christian realist is "to live boldly, not letting the uncertainties of life hold us back from taking risks by faith for the glory of God. The better part of spiritual wisdom is not caution but courage through Christ." [Hughes, p. 254]

Uncertain Returns in Life (v. 1-4)

¹ Cast your bread upon the waters,
for you will find it after many days.

² Give a portion to seven, or even to eight,
for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

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.

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

Solomon seems to have two main ideas in view: commerce and philanthropy, business ventures and generous giving. To live wisely in the world, we need to have the courage and confidence to please God by faith.

Verses one and two begin with commands. This is unusual in Ecclesiastes. But there they are: cast your bread on the waters and give a portion to... So in the face of risks and uncertainties, we have two commands that must be carried out wisely. These are not options for Christian realists. There is no totally safe space in which to build up our inventory of money and means. This is true personally and corporately. A business or a family or a church that hoards its resources will eventually begin to decline. This may be counter-intuitive, but it is unalterable principle of this fallen world.

Commentators regularly make application may be made to our personal lives and our ministries in Christ. Jesus and the New Testament writers often reflect the underlying truths here.

Invest (v. 1)

What does this phrase mean? “Cast your bread upon the waters and after many days you will see it return to you...” The New Living Translation primarily reflects the commercial, business understanding of this Hebrew idiom when it says, “Send your grain across the seas, and in time, profits will flow back to you.” So the command has to do with sending something out and expecting or hoping for something greater in return.

As one writer has noted, “Ships on commercial voyages might be long delayed before any profit resulted. Yet one’s goods had to be committed to them. Solomon’s fleet which brought back “gold, silver, ivory, apes, and peacocks” (1 Kings 10:22) sailed once in three years. Similarly the preacher has called his readers to take life as from the hand of God, and to enjoy it despite its trials and perplexities. Such a life contains within it the elements of trust and adventure (Cast), demands total commitment (for your bread is used in the sense of “goods, livelihood,” as in Deuteronomy 8:3, Proverbs 31:14), and has a forward look to it (you will find), a reward which requires patience (after many days).” [Eaton, cited by Hughes, p. 255]

In this world, this is a good command for those in business. It calls us to look beyond our local markets. Our local markets may be great. But there is something to be said for a more national or global orientation. But it will involve risk. Expansion and investment into a larger market place may be threatening, but it also may be profitable.

The great commission frames us to think about this in ministry. It is important for us to reach our neighborhoods. We have lost and believing people all around us who the gospel and Biblical discipling. This is important for without it we cannot build a base from which to send our bread, our seed, our grain into the nations. So we take send resources to the nations.

We send finances. God has blessed us here. You are an amazingly generous people. We have a good finance team and elder who leads our stewardship. When needs come to our attention through the relationships we have built and thus a certain amount of accountability, we have both drawn from our own funds and asked you to give. The result is that we have been enabled to bless churches near to us and far away from us.

We send people. God has given us many opportunities over the years to send individuals and teams to serve the larger body of Christ. What you saw this morning with the STM’s preparing for Joni and Friends is a part of sending people. We have sent construction teams and evangelism teams. Recently, the church and the elders have graciously sent Pastor Tim Rech and me to teach, train, encourage and build relationships with pastors, leaders and churches in the nations. I have just returned from a month in Romania and will spend May in Namibia.

This is all a part of casting our bread upon the water. We might not see the return in our life time. We may never know the full extent of what God does with our little bit. But be assured, it will be all He intends.

Multiply (v. 2)

In verse 2 the command is to “give”. Now we should not isolate this word as though it is talking about the giving of money in a church. The whole phrase has to be taken here. It really is a command to seek to maximize your efforts by diversifying those efforts. Again, the NLT understands this in a commercial sense, “But divide your investments among many places, for you do not know what risks might lie ahead.” This sounds remarkably like, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket...”

This wise business advice is also good for ministry. It is good for you to be involved in more than one ministry, to use your gifts widely. All of you have at least one gift and all of you have talents and abilities. How are you multiplying the growth and going of the kingdom here? And, it does apply to your giving.

Jesus echoes this in the parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-23) and of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) and in his instruction, ‘Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you’ (Luke 6:38).

And so we do as well. We send out our resources of money and people to different countries and cultures. We focus on the Roma or Gypsy people as an unreached people group. We network with churches in Romania, Namibia and with leaders in the Far East. We go almost always at our own cost so that the ministry may be received freely there.

Adjust (v. 3)

Things are what they are, this proverb says. If the clouds are full, it will rain. Once a tree falls, it lies how it fell. It is easy to understand what Solomon is saying. But what does he mean? What lesson are we to learn, under the sun? Given the context and that these couplets are all actually connected, it seems to me that Solomon wants us to learn to be careful observers. You, as a Christian realist, need to understand the way things are and align yourself accordingly.

There are some static principles that has built into the world. We think of them as the Laws of Nature. They provide a sense of norms and predictability. Sometimes God intervenes and does miracles. But normally clouds product rain and trees don’t rearrange themselves on the ground. So when dealing with the risks that casting our bread on waters and diversifying our efforts, we have to be aware of the way things work.

Now you would think you wouldn’t have to say this. It is just plain common sense. But most of us have worked in companies and I have worked in ministry settings where the way things work was ignored. This is often true in ministries who struggle with finance. Oh, the stories...

Results (v. 4)

Verses 3 and 4 are connected. If we keep looking at the clouds expecting rain, we many never do what we need to do. Unproductive, risk-adverse people tend not to begin the work nor to reap the benefits of their labor. We do not live in a risk-free world. All threats to the success of a project, a venture a church initiative, as humanly measured, cannot be totally

eliminated. We should be aware of them. And it is possible to be oblivious to them. Our tendency is to oscillate between the two. Faith is not folly. Faith hears God's promises and chooses wise actions in the real world.

The exhortation then is to not sit around waiting for ideal circumstances. The wind is never right for the sower and the clouds are never right for the reaper. If you are looking for an excuse for doing nothing, you can find one.

The kingdom will be expanded by saints who, believing God's promises, wisely obey even in the risks. Sometimes this will be financial commitments for ministry. Sometimes this will be personal commitments to hard ministry work. And for a few, it may involve personal difficulty and danger. Some advances in the kingdom will come in this fallen world when grace enables sacrificial doing.

Unknown Ways of God (v. 5)

What does the Christian know and trust in that enables verses 1-4?

⁵ As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

An Analogy

Solomon makes a comparison. The way the inner person enters the body and animates the body at conception and throughout life is largely a mystery to us. Materialists try to deny the existence of the immaterial part of man. But Christians who believe their Bibles know we are the union of a material body and an immaterial soul. The Bible teaches us this. Solomon here assumes it. There is a part of us that indwells our bodies and is deeply knit to the body. But how this comes to be we do not know. We know a lot about the formation of the material aspect but we know almost nothing about the formation of the immaterial. Even the Bible tells us difference functions of the soul but does not tell us about the formation of the soul.

The Reality

This mystery points us to the incarnation. That amazing mystery is the example and explanation for all the unseen interactions between God and creation. The Bible tells us that Jesus is both God and man in a clearly defined, but mysterious union. The second person of the Godhead and the man are united in such a way that there is one soul, one immaterial part in the material body. In the incarnation, we have the hidden, mysterious interaction between God and the material world.

Solomon then points us to the mysterious ways of God.

Mysterious ways of God in the world. God is always working out His purposes and plans in the world. When we believe this truth, we will trust God in the midst of the uncertainties of this world. The chaos and change and unpredictability is still all under

Mysterious ways of God in our lives. God is working in the lives of people and in our own lives. We do not understand how He directs and controls our choices but we know the heart of the king is in the hands of Lord; God directs whatsoever way He will. In the uncertainties of people around us, we know that God is directing all for our good and His glory.

Mysterious ways of God in the church. God is in control of the advances and the declines of the church. We work hard because we know God is at work. He is calling his elect to Himself through the spread of the gospel. Sometimes that is in a major advance in a people group. Other times it is through long, slow diligent labor that only bears fruit in future generations.

But know this: this world is fallen, cursed and chaotic. It is full of risks and uncertainties. But it is not out of control. The tangled tapestry we see is but the underside of the woven patterns of God's design.

Unguaranteed Results of our Labor (v. 6)

Here is the concluding exhortation..

⁶ Plant your seed in the morning and keep busy all afternoon, for you don't know if profit will come from one activity or another—or maybe both.

Exhortation

So work hard for the kingdom of God. Live boldly and creatively. Try something new! Be a spiritual entrepreneur. Even if you are not completely sure what will work, try everything you can to serve Christ in a world that desperately needs the gospel. Work hard from morning till night, making the most of your time by offering God a full day's work. Then leave the results to him, knowing that he will use your work in whatever way he sees fit.

Reason

The reason? You do not know what efforts God will bless. So cast your bread and diversify your efforts. Wisely choose but don't be afraid to take risks. Trust that God is in control. Let Him bring about the results He desires.

Reflect and Respond

As believers we do live with some of these kinds of uncertainties in our Christian lives and ministries.

As Christian realists we are ok with that.

As growing and maturing Christians, we live wisely by faith.

As people of faith in God and His Word, we work hard and obey well.

