

You Never Know! (Eccl. 11:1–6)

By Jacob D. Gerber

The constant theme of the Preacher throughout Ecclesiastes has been to emphasize the vanity of life. Nothing in this world can help us to transcend the futility of creation because of sin, so that our only hope is to fear the Lord in whose hand are all things. Nevertheless, the Preacher recognizes that some may twist this truth in a wrong direction, using the vanity of the world to justify passivity and inactivity. So, in Ecclesiastes 11:1–6, the Preacher confronts temptations to withdraw from living by insisting that we must move on with our lives and our work in spite of the troubles we face in this world. It is not that we should ignore the vanity of the world, but that we must get on with work because of our trust in God, even when we cannot trust anything under the sun. Far from encouraging passivity, the Preacher urges us: *In unsettling uncertainty, take appropriate action.*

Unsettling Uncertainty and Appropriate Action (Eccl. 11:1–4)

The Preacher's proverbs in Ecclesiastes 11:1–4 are extremely obscure to interpret individually. It is only when we read them together, then, that we can get a sense of their overall message, which, in turn, helps us to interpret each proverb's individual message. For our purposes, then, let's begin with a simple summary of these four verses, and then we will see how each proverb helps to fill out that summary. I will argue that these four verses argue for *appropriate action in the face of unsettling uncertainty*. Throughout the course of this book, the Preacher has reminded us repeatedly of the vanity of life under the sun. This does not mean, however, that the Preacher intends for us to shut down, retreat, and withdraw from active living. On the contrary, the Preacher warns us about the vanity of the world to prepare us so that we can act wisely and prudently rather than being caught off guard by the vanity we will inevitably face. Indeed, far from advocating for a passive view of life, Derek Kidner summarizes the Preacher's message in vv. 1–6 as "Be bold!"¹

Account for Delays (v. 1)

The first parable, then, emphasizes the wisdom of action in spite of the long duration that our unsettling uncertainty will inevitably take: "Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days" (v. 1). Commentators have suggested multiple options for what it means to "cast your bread upon the waters," but Roland Murphy summarizes the three major options: (1) traditionally, this has been seen as a reference to alms-giving; (2) more recent commentators typically see this as a reference to commerce at sea; (3) others see this as a description of senseless action.²

¹ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 96.

² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

Of these options, I think that (2) best fits the context for two reasons. First, Douglas Miller astutely observes that the language of “bread” (v. 1), “a portion” (v. 2), and “sow”/“reap” (v. 4) all “suggest economic matters” are in view.³ Second, as Duane Garrett reminds us in his commentary, Solomon (the Preacher) himself engaged in a significant amount of overseas trade (1 Kgs. 9:26–28; 10:22).⁴ Just as the warning about a ruler who is a “child” (Eccl. 10:16) a few verses earlier alluded to a significant moment in Solomon’s kingship (1 Kgs. 3:7), so this statement about casting bread upon the waters seems to remind us of Solomon’s own work. In particular, Michael Eaton writes that the “allusion is to the element of trust in much ancient business. Ships on commercial voyages might be long delayed before any profit resulted. Yet one’s goods had to be committed to them.”⁵ Charles Bridges draws an interesting application from this principle beyond economic activity to the spread of the gospel, drawing a parallel from this proverb to the parables of Jesus about the slow growth of the gospel seed. The one who labors in the gospel may be discouraged when those labors seem fruitless, but the “promise is sure—*Thou shalt find it after many days.*”⁶

Diversify your Investments (v. 2)

Second, the Preacher urges, “Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth” (v. 2). In light of the uncertainty we face in the world, the Preacher urges us to diversify the investment of our time, talents, and treasures in this world: “Such diversification is necessary because it affords protection against unforeseen calamity in one or two of the enterprises. An English equivalent is, ‘Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.’”⁷ Again, the Preacher does not want to freeze us in our tracks, terrified of taking a misstep in this cruel, unforgiving world. On the contrary, the Preacher wants to equip us to live wisely with the knowledge that our best plans will probably fail: “If that can be a paralysing thought, it can also be a spur to action: for if there are risks in everything, it is better to fail in launching out than in hugging one’s resources to oneself.”⁸ We need backup plans!

Whatever Will Happen, Will Happen (v. 3)

Third, the Preacher writes, “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” (v. 3). This parable points to the fact that certain calamities are inevitable: “whatever will happen (i.e., the inevitable) will happen.”⁹ Such events are “beyond human control,” so that we should not waste time and energy worrying about them.¹⁰ Importantly, though, the Preacher is not telling this so that we quit any ventures in life before we start; rather, he tells us this in order to get us beyond fears that something may go wrong. Of course something will go wrong! But whatever will be, will be, and

³ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 180.

⁴ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 338.

⁵ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 159.

⁶ Bridges, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 264.

⁷ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 338.

⁸ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 97.

⁹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 338.

¹⁰ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 109.

there is no point in trying to find a risk-free venture. The Preacher draws on this last point in the next parable in v. 4.

Don't be Ruled by Risk (v. 4)

Fourth, the Preacher illustrates the absurdity of trying to avoid risk: “He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap” (v. 4). The Preacher’s point is not to overlook any possibility of a *proper* time (cf. Eccl. 3:1–8; 10:17), but only to avoid waiting for the *perfect* time. Duane Garrett writes, “Verse 4...says that one cannot use the possibility of misfortune as an excuse for inactivity. Someone who is forever afraid of storms will never get around to working his field. The Teacher in effect says, ‘Just face the fact that things may go wrong, but get out there and do your work anyway.’”¹¹ The risks posed by the unsettling uncertainties of our lives cannot rule the day. The Preacher has warned extensively about the dangers of foolish action, and now he warns about the dangers of foolish inaction. The right response in the face of unsettling uncertainty is, instead, appropriate action.

You Never Know! (Eccl. 11:5–6)

Throughout Ecclesiastes, the Preacher has repeatedly emphasized how little we know (e.g., Eccl. 2:19; 3:21; 6:12; 8:1, 7; 9:1, 12; 10:14, 15; 11:2). In many cases, those reminders have served the purpose of underscoring the Preacher’s case about the vanity of the world. Here in v. 5–6, the Preacher emphasizes our lack of knowledge with the intent of urging us toward action. If v. 1–4 gave us proverbs to warn us against inaction, the Preacher now gives us an epistemological (i.e., how we know something) for appropriate action in the face of unsettling uncertainty. That is, the Preacher argues that we *don’t* know even the most basic facts about human life and existence. So, if we don’t know *that* we will necessarily *fail*, how can we let the uncertainty and doubt about our *success* stand in the way of action? You never know how things will turn out!

In v. 5, then, the Preacher points to our lack of understanding about the most basic element of life: the way the spirit comes to an unborn child: “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” (v. 5).¹² In the context of what the Preacher wrote before, the Preacher’s message is simply: “Just as in pregnancy a couple can only trust God that all will turn out well, even so in business enterprises one can only leave the outcome to God.”¹³ Indeed, even theologians continue to debate this question, since the Bible does not tell us much about this mystery. In general, there are two major positions: (1) the view that God originally created only the soul of Adam, and that each subsequent soul is formed by a mingling of the souls of the parents (traducianism); and (2) that God originally creates each new soul for each new person (creationism).¹⁴

¹¹ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 338.

¹² Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 109.

¹³ Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, 338.

¹⁴ cf. Donald Macleod, “Original Sin in Reformed Theology,” in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 129–46.

The Preacher then continues: “In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good” (v. 6). Again, this statement has been variously translated and interpreted. Most prominently, there is a question of whether the Preacher is urging sowing twice in the day (in the morning, and then again in the evening), or whether the preaching means from morning *until* the evening.¹⁵ If we take the first meaning, then this idea emphasizes the need to be ready “*at any time* rather than ‘all the time’ to exhaustion.”¹⁶ I also wonder whether the two sowings might suggest some variety of crops, where a farmer might not know whether this crop or that will prosper (cf. v. 2). Regardless of which specific nuance the Preacher means, the overall meaning is clear: so far from keeping us from action, our uncertainty should rather make us all the more diligent in our work. And again, the Scriptures give a certain gospel application to these principle: “The true response to uncertainty is a redoubling of effort, ‘making the most of the time’, ‘urgent in season and out of season’, expressed by [the Preacher] in terms of the farmer and his work, and by Paul in terms of the spiritual harvest from the good seed of the gospel and of works of mercy.”¹⁷

Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you think it means to “cast your bread upon the waters” (v. 1a)? Regardless of the meaning of that verse, what does the Preacher want us to know when he encourages us that “you will find it after many days” (v. 1b)? Where are you discouraged by the seeming lack of progress that you see around you in your life? What promises does God give us that he will build his kingdom by faithful ministry of the ordinary means of grace (the word, prayer, and sacraments)?
- 2) What does it mean to “give a portion to seven, or even to eight” (v. 2a)? In what parts of our lives should we diversify our investments? Why is diversification the logical conclusion of our ignorance of the future: “*for* you know not what disaster may happen on earth” (v. 2b)? Where are you tunnel-visioned and tempted to double-down in one pursuit? How does fear play a role in keeping you from diversifying your investments of time, talents, and treasure?
- 3) What does the Preacher mean when he states that rainclouds will bring rain, and trees will fall and lie in the forest where they fall (v. 3)? What can humans do to prevent such events from happening? What, though, does the Preacher mean when he warns us against delaying sowing or reaping because we are monitoring conditions (v. 4)? What is the difference between the *proper* times for certain things, and the *perfect* time for something?
- 4) Why does the Preacher remind us that we do not know God’s work in bringing a human soul to a baby growing in a womb (v. 5)? How can our ignorance of God’s work in the world propel us to labor diligently (v. 6)? In what ways does Jesus apply the lessons of this passage when he talks about the growth of the kingdom of God (e.g., Mark 4:26–29)? How should we be diligent to scatter the seed of the gospel, even when we don’t know how or when God will give the growth?

¹⁵ Murphy, *Ecclesiastes*, 109–110.

¹⁶ Miller, *Ecclesiastes*, 181.

¹⁷ Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes*, 98.