

Ecclesiastes

Lecture 20

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Chapter 11: Imagine you are a psychologist - and your client has been sitting through our little series on the book of Ecclesiastes. He has heard – ad nauseum, as I’m sure some of you are thinking – about God’s inscrutable providence. He grasps how elusive, fleeting and unmanageable life is. He’s been impressed with the idea that wisdom is fragile and vulnerable. He knows, perhaps too vividly, that time and chance befall everyone. He knows that men can be trapped suddenly like fish in a cruel net, or like unsuspecting birds in a snare.

The universality, the inevitability, the random and pervasive reality of death, has struck his consciousness deeply. He was particularly struck by how any little thing – a dead fly, a stone, a splinter, a snake – any little thing can ruin our well-planned endeavors. He comes into your office and you innocently ask how he’s doing; he seems visibly distressed, so you ask him to elaborate on what’s bothering him, and he says this (and I quote): “Wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted, but openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death.”

What do you mean? You say. He continues: “Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets; you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend’s, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction.”

Surely, you say, a certain amount of simple, basic caution can eliminate most of these dangers. He does not appear comforted, and continues (I’m still quoting): “If you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse on you.”

“Your field, since it is exposed to hail, frost, drought, and other calamities, threatens you with barrenness, and hence, famine.” Is that all, you ask?

He continues: “I pass over poisonings, ambushes, robberies, open violence, which in part besiege us at home, in part dog us abroad. Amid these tribulations must not man be the most miserable, since, but half alive in life, he weakly draws

his anxious and languid breath, as if he had a sword hanging perpetually over his neck?”

Your client, it turns out, is named John Calvin. And his grim soliloquy is recorded in Book I of his ICR. You make a note to call his pastor and ask what in the world he's been preaching on. And what I would tell the psychologist is that there is nothing wrong with his client. It is not me, but the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, who is the source of his distress.

Finally, I would tell him to make sure Mr. Calvin hears our next passage, which is on Eccl 11, verses 1 through 6. Here, the Preacher wants to make sure we don't end up paralyzed on some therapist's couch, convinced there is nothing we can do that makes any difference. Here, I will make 5 points: first, in vv. 1 and 2, confidence, second, in vv. 3-4, threats, third, in v. 4 paralysis, fourth, in v.5, ignorance, and fifth, in v.6, labor.

I. Confidence

First, then, confidence. Verse 1: Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Now, taken literally, this is silly advice unless you either hate bread, or like it really soggy. This verse and verse 2 are clearly metaphors, but the question is, metaphors for what?

Historically, there are two main interpretations given here. The first, which goes back to Jerome in the 4th c., is that the text has almsgiving in view. The Preacher is counseling generosity in almsgiving and charity in the face of an unstable and unpredictable world. Give generously, without expecting anything in return and, paradoxically, against all human odds, God's inscrutable providence will see that your charity comes back to you. And certainly this is a sound biblical idea. He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord and he will repay him. Give, Jesus said, and it will be given unto you.

The second main interpretation that is given is that international trading by means of the sea is what is in view. Be bold and cast your bread – which here would mean your goods, your substance – on the water and, after many days, it will return to you. Solomon himself, 1 Kings 10 tells us, sent out ships which would return every three years loaded with goods from all over the world.

On the first interpretation, almsgiving, verse 2 would be about dividing up your liberality among many causes. On the second interpretation, trading, v.2 would be about diversification. And would mean don't put all your eggs in one basket. Use seven or eight ships so that if one is shipwrecked you don't suffer a total loss. Or, in modern terms, use a mutual fund instead of picking stocks in your trading.

I don't think we really need to choose here, because I want to assert that what the preacher is doing is affirming a basic approach to life, which would include almsgiving and trading, but covers all we do. His point here is: I know I've told you a lot of unnerving things. I've forced you to look at life in ways that you'd rather avoid. But I don't want you to end up like Mr. Calvin in his therapist's office. The advice in v.1 is thus: venture forth with confidence. The sheer impossibility of throwing bread onto the water yielding anything productive is a metaphor for what all human action looks like to the Preacher in the face of inscrutable vapor. The world the Preacher has narrated looks like a senseless place for human activity. But he says to us here - take the risk: *nothing ventured, nothing gained.*

Notice what this will entail: it will entail radical trust. You have to CAST, to throw away, to hurl your life into the sea of inscrutable providence. It will entail commitment. You are to cast your BREAD – your stuff, your time, talent and treasure, out into the roiling and dangerous waters. It will entail confidence in the goodness of God that, as the text says, you WILL find it. God does, inscrutably, give back to those who pour themselves out.

Finally, it will entail patience. For the text says you will find it after MANY DAYS. Solomon had to wait years for his ships to return. There is no direct feedback here. No mechanism that can be discerned in advance. No send me your check and God will give you a hundred-fold return. This is a call for bold, decisive risk taking. Yet, it is not a call to recklessness. V.2 amounts to a call for wise generosity. Give – or divide – a portion to seven, or even to eight. Here we begin with seven which is the number of divine fullness or completion.

And from there the ante is upped to eight. So the preacher is saying invest your life fully, even super-abundantly, in a diversity of godly ventures. Give yourself to the full range of human activity in confident hope. And the reason for this range of action is given in the second half of v.2: For you do not know what disaster may happen on earth. The preacher has not turned into your garden-variety motivational speaker. He takes nothing back. He rescinds none of his grim survey of the vapor. It is precisely because catastrophes can and will happen, and you have no foreknowledge of them, that you should invest your life and goods in a myriad of diverse fields.

The preacher has seen a man, in chapter 5, lose everything in one bad venture. If your whole life is your house, one tornado can ruin that. If your whole life is your family, one car accident can take that. If your whole life is your job, one layoff can devastate that. Mr. Calvin is not paranoid. You don't know what disaster will fall on the earth. The only indestructible thing is the kingdom of God. Invest across the wide spectrum of the civilization of God. Be zealous for good WORKS –plural.

II. Threats

Our second point is threats. v.3 says: If the clouds are full of rain – literally, pregnant with 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 lies. Here is a man standing in a field. He contemplates all the bad stuff that can happen. Maybe there will be a storm. Maybe another tree, like that one over there, will fall unexpectedly. Any project, any human labor, faces extraordinary vulnerability. There are innumerable things that can go wrong. There are, Chesterton said, an infinity of angles at which one can fall, only one at which one stands. The key question is: how does one manage the risks?

III. Paralysis

This brings us to our third point, paralysis, in v.4. He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. If the wind is not just right, the seed will be blown all over the place. If a rain storm threatens maybe the reaping should be postponed. If you are the kind of person who calculates all the risks of any undertaking then you will end up curled up in a ball on your bathroom floor. Or in this case, watching the weather channel indefinitely.

Most normally adjusted people can avoid this, but it's not because the risks are non-existent. It's because a healthy person naturally buffers out some of the far-fetched risks. If you've ever counseled a truly paranoid person you realize that almost nothing they say is untrue or impossible. They see all the risks better than most people; they just can't buffer and assess them properly. Paranoia and paralysis ALWAYS have their reasons. The man in the parable of the talents saw all the risks of investing. He saw that God's providence was inscrutable – he reaps where he doesn't sow and gathers where he doesn't scatter – and he concluded God was a hard man. So, he thought he would do the sensible, risk-reducing thing, and simply hide his talent. It is possible to be too risk averse, to demand more certainty than is reasonable or good. If you live like that you are responding improperly to the Preacher's description of providence.

We are not called to simply to minimize risk. If we were v.1 would be pure folly. Risk, and a healthy dose of it, MUST be taken if we are to live in the Preacher's world. Ideal conditions rarely, if ever, occur. You can't win if you don't play.

IV. Ignorance

Our fourth point is ignorance. Verse 5 says: 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. We may know more embryology than the Preacher, just as we know a lot more about the complex order of the

universe, yet our sense of wonder and awe are not diminished. We don't know how God's Spirit comes to the bones of a child skillfully wrought in his mother womb, and this is simply emblematic of our general ignorance, the preacher says, of all that God makes and does.

This verse may have been alluded to in a moving story from the ancient Jewish book of second Maccabees which tells of a mother and her seven sons who were successively tortured to death for their refusal to eat the meat of an unclean pig. After watching her first son killed, the mother encouraged the remaining sons with these words: "I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of man and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again." That is true piety's response to ignorance. She cast her very sons on the chaotic waters knowing she would receive them back after many days.

V. Labor

Our final point is labor. Verse 6: In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not withhold your hand, or - do not let your hand be idle. The point is not that we labor only in the morning and the evening, but rather that we labor the whole day long. Here, Mr. Calvin is being told not to worry about the rain and the plague and the hail that might afflict his field. He is called, like us, to sow in hope. It is, once again, precisely our IGNORANCE of God's plan that should cause us to labor vigorously. The text says you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. You do not know which of your labors God will prosper.

There is a marvelous story of a man named Luke Short in Virginia who at the age of 103 recalled a sermon he had heard from the mouth of the great Puritan John Flavel. As he recalled the sermon he was converted. He died three years later at age 106 and his tombstone read: "Here lies a babe in grace, aged 3 years, who died according to nature, aged 106." The remarkable thing is that the sermon he remembered was preached by Flavel 85 years earlier back in England. Your labor is intrinsically, considered in itself, vapor. It is God who gives it increase when and where He sees fit.

Finally, let me remind you that Jesus, in the teeth of an inscrutable providence, used this very sowing metaphor of his own life, which was given – cast forth, as bread for the life of the world. He said: Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; BUT IF IT DIES, it bears much fruit. So, do not hoard your stuff and do not hoard your very life. Cast your bread on the stormy waters. Take some healthy calculated risks. Sow and labor all day long. Redouble your efforts. Heed the advice of Gal 6:9-10: Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in

due season we shall reap if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith. Amen.

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