

“Facing Life’s Uncertainties”

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

Throughout the centuries, God has raised up faithful men and women to shine like bright lights in the midst of a very dark world. Some of the most important people who have ever lived received no recognition or reward in this life, but will be revealed as kings and queens in eternity to come.

I have been profoundly impressed with the sacrifices made by Christian men and women throughout the centuries of church history. From martyrs to missionaries, these men and women served God with great intensity and courage, and they stood as faithful examples for those who come behind them. They are those of whom “this world was not worthy” (Hebrews 11:38) because their eyes were not fixed on the stuff of this world, but on heaven.

One of my heroes, and I talk about him a lot, is Adoniram Judson. When he entered Burma in 1813, it was a hostile and unreached place. William Carey had told him a few months earlier not to go there. Today, it probably would have been considered a closed country—with anarchic despotism, fierce war with Siam, enemy raids, constant uprisings, and no religious toleration. All of the previous missionaries had died or quit after a while. But Adoniram Judson went there with his 23 year old wife of barely a year. He was just 24, and he labored there in the name of Christ for nearly 40 years until his own death at age 61, with only one trip home to America after 33 years. The price he paid was immense. He was a seed that fell into the ground and died again and again, and in so doing resulted in much fruit for the kingdom, though much of it came beyond his lifetime.

There are times when we wonder whether anything we do for God really matters, whether it really makes a difference. Life seems to be lived on a hamster wheel

—we run and yet never seem to be getting anywhere. Add to this the fact that the rug can get pulled from beneath your feet any given moment. Something unforeseen hits you much like a lightning bolt coming out of nowhere. Solomon considers all of this in Ecclesiastes. One of the themes we have seen come up in several places in our study is the uncertain, unpredictable nature of life under the sun. No matter how hard a person works and no matter who they are, he says that life under the sun is full of uncertainty. When it comes to life, the one thing that remains the same is that nothing remains the same. Things are in a constant state of flux, and you never know what awaits on the horizon.

How do we deal with the uncertainty of life? What are our options? You can adopt the view that says since life is so uncertain, live it up while you can. Eat, drink, and be merry, for you could die tomorrow. It is the kind of living that throws caution to the wind. Or, you can adopt a view that is full of worry and fear of what might happen and never truly lives at all. The Preacher shows us how we can avoid both of these extremes. At least four times in these verses, we find the phrase '*you do not know.*' For instance:

- you don't know what disaster might happen (v. 2)
- you don't know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child (v. 5)
- you don't know the work of God (v. 5)
- you don't know which will prosper (v.6)

It is Solomon's way of expressing the uncertain nature of life. And rather than living in fear of what might happen, we're called to live by faith. We do this in three ways:

1. Don't be panicked—INVEST your resources (11:1-2)

“Cast your bread upon the waters, for 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.”

When faced with uncertainty, it becomes real easy for us to panic and live with a sense of fear or worry. After all, look at what the Preacher says in verse 2—“You know not what disaster may happen on earth.” I mean we get a lump in our throat just thinking about it. We're all like a bunch of helpless sheep in a dangerous world, especially when you consider all that we don't know.

Because people are evil, we don't know what will happen. That's why we lock our doors at night. That's why we don't give a telemarketer our credit card number. That's why we don't leave our children unattended in public. People are evil, and it invites a level of uncertainty into our world.

Because storms are unpredictable, we don't know what will happen. A tornado never calls you in advance and tells you what time it will be dropping by.

Because the plans of God are mysterious, we don't know what will happen. We trust His character and believe the promises of His Word, but we don't know His timing.

The things that Solomon tells us to do here are counter-intuitive. Notice that he uses the language of generosity and investment. Usually the thing that we want to do when faced with uncertainty is hold on tighter to what we have.

Verse 1 begins with a couple of commands that may seem strange. The commands are simple enough but the poetic images are hard to define. Perhaps in your mind, you can imagine a couple of slices of Sunbeam bread floating down the creek! If that's the idea, who has ever seen a piece of bread hold its

consistency or be edible after becoming so waterlogged? He's using figurative language.

Probably the most likely interpretation of this instruction is to invest your resources. Put what you have to good use in light of life's uncertainty. In Solomon's time, the merchants would send their grain out to sea and wait for the ships to come in loaded with goods acquired in trade deals. A great deal of faith was required by the merchant.

To 'cast your bread upon the waters' is to put your God-given resources to use. The promise is that you will find it after many days. In other words, reward eventually comes after taking the risk of investment. But if there is nothing given, there will be nothing gained. If there's no investment there will be no return. Faith puts its resources to good use.

Because life is so uncertain, we are often tempted to hold on to what we have. Instinct kicks in and we get into self-preservation mode. But instead of circling the wagons, we need to send our ships out to sea. Cast your bread upon the waters, and put your resources to kingdom use.

Micheal Eaton—“...rather than holding on to what we have and hoarding it all for ourselves, the wise man will invest everything he has in the life of faith.”

Jesus gave a parable in Mathew 25 to illustrate this very principle, known as the parable of the talents.

Matthew 25:14-15—“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away.”

The servants were to be industrious with their Master's property. The one with five talents went out and traded and made five more. The one with two talents

did the same. But the guy who had one talent buried it in the ground and did nothing with it. When the Master returned, he settled accounts with the servants. He rewarded the industrious servants, but he judged the one who did nothing with all that he had been given. In the same way, faith demands that we invest our resources. We will one day stand before the Master, so put what He's given you to good use.

2. Don't be paralyzed—SEIZE your opportunity (11:3-4)

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

Some people are absolutely paralyzed by uncertainty and freeze up. They are so 'risk averse' that they keep waiting until conditions are perfect before they serve God and do what He calls them to do. Sometimes, we fail to see the opportunities to serve God that are right under our nose because we are always looking for an ideal situation. And if that is so, we will never do anything at all. While waiting for our perfect ship to come in, we end up spending our lives on the dock.

The Preacher paints the picture of gathering storm clouds on the horizon. The clouds are dark and full of rain. The winds are gusting and threatening. There's nothing you can do to prevent a storm from coming. You can't keep the rain from falling, and you can't keep the wind from blowing over a tree. The one who observes the wind will not sow, and the one who regards the clouds will not reap.

Solomon's point is this—there are things in life beyond our control. If we wait for the perfect circumstances before we begin to enjoy life, life will only pass us by. You can worry about the wind and clouds that you never sow, and if you never

sow you will never reap. That is why we need to make the most of the time while we have it because it will soon be up. Faith seizes present opportunities.

By using this illustration, Solomon is gives us a practical warning that we can apply to a lot of situations in life. How do you react when things beyond your control happen? If you are like me, I imagine you can become paralyzed with fear. You put off doing something you should do today until tomorrow because maybe the weather will be better. Yet as long as we keep thinking this way, we will never fully live life to the glory of God.

Philip Ryken—*“At planting time there is always a chance that the weather will stay dry, in which case the seed we sow will shrivel and die. At harvest time, there is always a chance that a storm will strike before we get all the grain safely into the barn. There are no guarantees in life.”*

Instead of watching the wind and worrying about the rain, imagining all the difficulties and waiting for better and more perfect circumstances, we should try and do what we can with whatever God has given us in life.

If you're married, enjoy life with your spouse and don't take one another for granted. Seize the opportunity.

If you're single, enjoy life and don't let it slip by while you wait for someone to come along. Seize the opportunity.

If you're a student, enjoy life and don't count the days until you graduate. Seize the opportunity.

Pursue the thing that God puts in your heart and don't look back. Get involved in ministry. Show mercy to someone in need. Strike up a conversation with a stranger and pray God gives you an opportunity to share Christ. Don't go through life paralyzed by fear and procrastination.

Perhaps you've heard this poem before:

*He was going to be all that a mortal could be. . . Tomorrow
None should be kinder or braver than he. . . Tomorrow
A friend who was troubled and weary he knew,
Who'd be glad of a lift and who needed it, too,
On him he would call to see what he could do. . . Tomorrow
Each morning he'd stack up the letters he'd write. . . Tomorrow
And he thought of the friends he would fill with delight. . . Tomorrow
It was too bad indeed; he was busy each day,
And hadn't a minute to stop on his way;
"More time I'll give to others," he'd say. . . Tomorrow
The greatest of workers this man would have been. . . Tomorrow
The world would have known him, had he ever seen. . . Tomorrow
But the fact is he died, and faded from view,
And all that he left here when living was through
Was a mountain of things he intended to do. . . Tomorrow.*

Let's not waste the opportunities we've been given through procrastinating and making excuses! Instead, take all that you have been given and put it to use for the Master. Have faith that God will take what you offer and use it in some way for His glory.

3. Don't be passive—EXERCISE your faith (11:5-6)

"As you do to 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. 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."

When facing uncertainty in life, we must not be panicked and should invest our resources. Then, we must not be paralyzed and should seize our opportunities. Third, the Preacher says we must not be passive, but should exercise our faith.

There is much in life that we don't know and can't explain. Yet rather than letting fear hold you back, let faith propel you forward.

William Carey—*“Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.”*

In verse 5, Solomon uses an analogy to remind us just how little our knowledge is compared to God's. He says, “As you don't know the way that spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you don't know the work of God who makes everything.” The way that life begins at the very moment of conception and the growth of a child in his mother's womb is nothing short of a miracle.

1 day to 7 weeks

A new individual receives 23 chromosomes from each parent. He or she is truly a unique individual human being, never to be repeated. A new person has been created, who at this stage is a tiny living organism weighing only 15 ten-millionth of a gram. Life begins.

First day of new life: The first cell divides into two, the two into four, and so on. Each of these new cells divides again and again as they travel toward the womb in search of a protected place to grow.

18 days from conception, heart begins to beat, with the baby's own blood.

28 days from conception a baby has eyes, ears, and even a tongue! Muscles are developing along the future spine. Arms and legs are budding.

30 days: Child has grown 10,000 times to 6-7mm (1/4”) long. Brain has human proportions. Blood flows in veins.

42 days: Skeleton is formed. Brain coordinates movement of muscles and organs. Reflex responses have begun. Brain waves can be detected, the jaw

forms, including teeth and taste buds. The unborn baby begins to swallow amniotic fluid. Fingers and toes are developing.

45 days from conception: The unborn baby is making body movements, a full 12 weeks before the mother may notice such stirrings. By seven weeks the chest and abdomen are fully formed. Facial muscles develop. Eyelids begin to form, protecting the developing eyes. Elbows take shape. Internal organs are present, but immature. 99% of muscles are present, each with its own nerve supply. The baby now looks like a miniature human infant.

52 Days: Spontaneous movement begins. The unborn baby then develops a whole collection of moves over the next 4 weeks including hiccuping, frowning, squinting, furrowing the brow, pursing the lips, moving individual arms and legs, head turning, touching his/her face, breathing (without air), stretching, opening the mouth, yawning.

8 – 10 weeks

8 Weeks: Now a small-scale baby, at approximately 3 cm (1 1/8") and weighing a gram, yet well proportioned. Every organ is present. Baby's heartbeat is steady. Stomach produces digestive juices. Liver makes blood cells. Kidneys begin to function. Taste buds are forming.

8 ½ Weeks: The unborn baby's fingerprints are being engraved. Eyelids and palms of hands are sensitive to touch. (from <https://prolifeacrossamerica.org/baby-developmental-facts/>)

Psalm 139:13-14—“For You formed my inward parts; You knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are Your works; my soul knows it very well.”

If the work of God in the womb is not enough, consider the work of God in the universe. Three or four years ago, NASA released the biggest picture ever, and

it was taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. It would take more than 600 HD screens to display the entire billion-and-a-half pixels. The image is an amazing view of more than 100 million stars in our galactic neighbor, the Andromeda Galaxy. See it for yourself...

Solomon says, "You do not know the work of God who makes everything." From the tiniest of atoms to the furthest galaxy, from the womb to the wind, from the ocean depths to the mountain heights and every where in between, the whole universe is marvelous and mysterious. Solomon looks beyond the mystery to the One who is in control of it all, the One whose hand forms the baby in the womb, the One who knows the name of every single star. And he then recognizes that what God does in our own individual lives and circumstances is no less mysterious and wonderful.

How should we respond? Look at verse 6:

"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."

Life may be uncertain, and we may never know what is just beyond the bend. But there is a God in heaven who is in perfect control of His universe. Therefore, it remains for us to sow our seeds in the morning even though the rains may come, and even though the winds may blow. And when the evening comes, don't withhold your hand. In other words, don't ever get to the point where you must sit around and collect dust, waiting to die. Serve God and live by faith, no matter what time it is.

Life's uncertainty in view of God's sovereignty is a call for personal humility.

There are things we may never know, but we'll never reap if we don't sow. I ought to work hard for the kingdom of God from dawn to dusk, making the most

of my time and glorifying God by offering Him my life. He's the Lord of the harvest!

John 12:24—“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

The Bread of Life was cast upon the waters of death for the sins of the world. Jesus didn't just give His life for seven or for eight; He gave His life for the whole of humanity, and whoever believes in Him will never die. The fruit of His labor is the countless multiplied millions upon millions of believers who make up His church.

As believers, we've got some seed sowing to do ourselves, don't we? I mean you and I have been given gospel seed. We ought to live our lives to sow the Word of God. You sow it when you read it, study it, and store it up in your heart. You sow it when you teach it to your children at bedtime. You sow it when you share its truth with a neighbor. You sow it when you take it to the local jail, to a nursing home, or to a college campus.

Isaiah 55:10-11—“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Galatians 6:9—“Let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.”

Psalms 126:5-6—“Those who sow in tears shall reap in joy. He who goes forth weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”

When Adoniram Judson left America for Burma, he was simply casting his bread upon the waters. Even though it would be seven years before he won his first convert, he kept sowing his seed in the morning. When he buried his wife and children, it was evening, but he didn't withhold his hand. He was a seed that fell into the ground and died again and again, and it eventually resulted in much fruit for the kingdom. According to World Christian Encyclopedia, "The largest Christian force in Burma is the Burma Baptist Convention, which owes its origin to the pioneering activity of Adoniram Judson."

Patrick Johnstone, in Operation World, estimated the Myanmar Baptist Convention to be 3,700 congregations with 617,781 members and 1.9 million affiliates. This is the fruit of his dead seed!

*Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness,
Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves,
Bringing in the sheaves, bringing in the sheaves,
We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves!*