

Stop Existing And Start Living

Series on Ecclesiastes

There are plenty of people who are willing to give us free advice. Here is some common counsel that's usually given to those who are ageing.

- Take it easy - don't exert yourself.
- Be protective of yourself. You're not getting any younger.
- Be careful. Don't take risks.
- Hold on to what you've got. Things are going to get worse.

Have you heard advice like that? It's sound, sensible, secular wisdom. And it's silly! Where in the Scriptures does it tell us not to risk? Where does the bible tell us not to exert ourselves? Where does it say that we should hold on to what we have?

After a lifetime of looking at life, King Solomon comes to the conclusion that we're to be bold, be joyful and to be Godly. God has taken this man through lots of experiences and now God is using him to pass on to us some important principles for living.

We find the first one in Verse 1 of Chapter 11. Here it is. **"Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again."** (Ecclesiastes 11:1)

1. **Be Adventurous.**

Cast your bread on the waters. What does that mean? I could never figure this one out. I had visions of feeding the ducks at the local pond, or throwing loaves of fresh bread into a river. But having done a bit of research, I find most scholars think this is a reference by Solomon to his fleet of ships that traded around his world. Solomon used to send out ships full of grain to trade with other nations. They would return with gold, and all sorts of fine goods from other lands. Now when you send a shipload of grain out, you have to wait many days before it returns. It's a time of uncertainty. A time of waiting and not knowing. But traders take the risk, believing there will be a payoff. Cautious people never go to sea. What if a storm blows up? What if my shipload of precious cargo sinks? What if pirates steal it all? What if? What if? Cautious people get so consumed by the "what if" questions they never cast their bread on the waters.

These same business principles apply to investment in the Kingdom of God. Be adventurous. Don't always play it safe. Some of the happiest people I know are people who have been adventurous in their Christian faith. People who stopped clinging on to what they wanted for themselves and generously gave to others. They gave their money to people in need. They gave their time and attention to meeting the needs of others. They blessed others with their gifts and talents. They kept giving out of themselves and God kept filling them up. The more they gave out to others the more the Lord kept pouring it in. God kept blessing and they kept giving the blessings away. The more they gave out to others the more the Lord kept pouring in the blessing. What a way to live! Now that's living! God has this great way of bringing back to you what you give away to others. Cast your bread on the waters. What a pity Solomon didn't figure that out at the beginning of his life. Imagine the good he could have done with his talent and his money.

2. **Spread Your Risk.**

That's the second principle. This is how Solomon states it. **"Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land."** (Ecclesiastes 11:2) What's he saying here? All through this journal Solomon has been reminding us that we don't know the future. We don't know what is going to happen. Calamity and disaster overtake even the wisest of people. Even the best people get struck down by the unexpected. So he is telling us to spread our investments. Or to use a common expression – "don't put all your eggs in one basket". That's wise investment advice, but how do we apply this principle in the Kingdom of God?

Don't just give in one way, give in lots of ways. Be generous with your money. Be generous with your time. Be generous with your service. Be generous with your ability to care for others. God invites us to be venture capitalists in his Kingdom. Invest in people and projects that are going to have eternal results. And recognise that not everything we invest in will show instant success. Not all of them will bear fruit. Not every new church that is planted survives. Not every new ministry initiative is successful. Not every person we invest time in decides to follow Christ. But for the ones that do, it's been a good investment. It was John Wesley who said "Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, to all the souls you can, in every place you can, at all the times you can, with all the zeal you can, as long as ever you can".

3. Take A Long Term View.

Solomon moves from a business analogy to a farming one. ***"If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it 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 not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. (Ecclesiastes 11:3 -6)***

How successful would a farmer be if he kept thinking "I'd better not plant anything because we might have a drought next summer". Thank God that farmers are willing to take risks. They plant a field with crops, not knowing what the weather is going to be over the next few months while the crop is growing. If every farmer in the world waited until conditions were perfect before planting their crops, you and I would have nothing to eat. Too often we get paralysed by things that we can't control. We don't do things because it might rain. Or it might be too sunny, or too cold or too hot. I have never been able to figure that part of the weather report where they tell us what the weather was like today. What does it matter? Today's weather has happened. We can't change it. We spend so much energy on things we can't change. Why do we spend time worrying about taxes? We can't change them. Why do we spend time worrying about what people think of us? We can't change that. We spend time worrying about our mortgages, the wrinkles on our faces, death, the weather - and we don't have any control over any of those things. So let's take the long term view and get on with living! It was Eugene Petersen who titled one of his books "A Long Obedience In The Same Direction". That's what it means to follow Jesus.

History is full of inspiring people who took a long term view, and just got on with life. William Gladstone took up a new language at 70 years of age and was elected to a fourth term as prime minister at 83 years of age. John Wesley was still riding his horse and preaching sermons every day, studying while he rode his horse and he was still doing all that at 88 years of age. Benjamin Ryrie was a missionary in China. When he was 80 years old he decided to learn New Testament Greek. In his 80s he was proficient in New Testament Greek. At 90 he went to seminary for a refresher course. Can you imagine the age of the students around him? At one hundred years of age he was still getting around on public transport, practising his Greek on the bus, Get into life! Get into to all the things that can be changed. Then start living the life that Jesus talked about - life in all its fullness.

4. Get A Bigger View Of God And His Ways.

Here's the last bit of Solomon's conclusion about life.

"Light is sweet, and it pleases the eyes to see the sun. However many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all. But let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything to come is meaningless. Be happy, young man, while you are young, and let your heart give you joy in the days of your youth. Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you to judgment.

So then, banish anxiety from your heart and cast off the troubles of your body, for youth and vigour are meaningless.” (Ecclesiastes 11:7 – 10)

When we live an adventurous life with God, and we take a long term view of his plans and purposes, we begin to see just how great he is, and the amazing way that he works. Here's something to remind us of the greatness of God. In 2004 the Hubble Space Telescope photographed a tiny sliver of space through prolonged exposures that lasted for more than eleven days. Then astronomers counted the number of galaxies in the photograph. In that one little subsection of the universe, there were ten thousand galaxies, each containing one hundred billion stars. When you hear of something like that, doesn't it make you marvel at the work of God in creation? Doesn't that sort of information make you want to worship this infinitely creative and majestic God, maker of heaven and earth? As this scripture says ***"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"***. There is a sense in which we are meant to live life in awe and wonder at the works and ways of our creator.

Here's another example of the majestic work of our God, who not only creates, but re-creates and makes all things new. In the 1650s a Puritan preacher named John Flavel was preaching his church in Dartmouth, England. At the end of his sermon John Flavel prayed and asked God's blessing on that message. In the congregation that day was an 18 year old young man named Luke Short, who soon afterwards emigrated to New England, in North America. It seemed as though the message of the gospel hadn't got through to Luke Short, for he lived most of his earthly life without a relationship with Christ. But when Luke Sort died, this is what was written on his tombstone. "Here lies a babe in grace, aged three years, who died according to nature, aged 106." Three years before he died, when he was 103, Luke Short was sitting under a hedge in Virginia, thinking about a sermon he had heard 85 years before. As he thought about that sermon, Luke Short asked God to forgive his sins right then and there, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Who can understand the ways of God, that a 103 year old man would be convicted by a sermon he heard at 18? God does things that you and I don't understand. He works in ways that are a mystery to us. His timetable is not ours. It's worth sowing seeds of faith into the lives of our children and grandchildren, for we never know when or how they will bear fruit.

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Enjoy the life God has given you. Enjoy it now. Some people think "I'll enjoy life when I own a boat or house." Some people say "I'm waiting to meet the right person, then I'll enjoy life." Some people live as if they can't enjoy life until they have got the job in the corner office where the boss sits. God is saying to us through Solomon "enjoy life now no matter how old or young you are. The chief end of man is to love God and enjoy him forever. God is giving us the OK to live life to the full. Stop existing and start living.

There is a balancing note to this chapter. God tells us to enjoy life, but he also tells us to be realistic.

Verse 8 tells us to remember that there are dark days. Verse 9 tells us to remember that we will be held accountable. God gives us the green light, but tells us to guard ourselves from running wild. This journal of King Solomon is fascinating. It's as if in the final reflections on his life he wakes up to the fact that a life lived with God is the most meaningful life of all. We only have to turn over to the pages of the New Testament to see the words of Jesus. ***"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full". (John 10:10)*** Not just pie in the sky when you die, but real life, eternal life, right now! Jesus offers us this life. Everything Solomon longed for and looked for is available right now to every one of us in Jesus. What is it that is stopping you from enjoying that life for yourself?

David McChesney, Westlake Church in Nyon, Switzerland