

# Ecclesiastes 11

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[ 0 : 00 ] This book is brutally honest about life. Be under no illusions. Under the sun, this life is littered with grievous evil, injustice, dissatisfaction.

! The preacher of Ecclesiastes, as he's taken us through on his world tour, pulls back the curtains, doesn't he, and confronts us with the reality of the reality of the world.

Well done for bearing with him and listening to him over these past few weeks because I want to encourage you that all of the difficult stuff that we've been taught in this book so far, all of the difficult stuff is for our good.

It is for true life because all of it interrupts the charade that we play in life. The charade that without God and without receiving life from God as a gift, that we can be totally satisfied.

But it's a charade of empty, vain joy. And yet he's got us to the point here near to the end of the book where he can speak more positively and resolutely.

[ 1 : 20 ] He's a bit more strident in this passage. And you can sum up his message, I think, in two words this afternoon. Be bold. Be bold. Just look at some of the verbs that he uses, the doing words.

And verse 1, cast. Cast. Verse 2, give. Verse 6, sow. Cast, give, sow. Be bold with your life. Be bold with two areas in life.

First of all, he says, be bold with two areas in life. Be bold with two areas in life. Be bold with two areas in life. Be bold with the uncertainties of life. It's been said before that fortune favours the bold before it favours the worthy.

And there is real truth in that, isn't there? When there's nothing ventured, there's nothing gained, he who dares wins. But we can so easily live life with the motto, what if? What if? Uncertainties, uncertainty can stunt life.

And endless speculation over uncertainty can stunt life. Because we want control, don't we? We live life in an imaginary control tower with one of those kind of radar screens in front of us.

[ 2 : 47 ] And we try to keep track of all the aircraft. All the incomings and all the outgoings of life. And our radar is spinning constantly. But control, he is about to tell us in everything, is an illusion.

Verse 2, you don't know what disaster may happen. Uncertainties. And there are things in life that just happen. From our point of view, there's no rhyme or reason. There's no control.

The clouds, he says, are full of rain. Then they empty themselves on the earth. And then a tree falls in the woods somewhere, either to the south or to the north.

There it goes. And there it lies. No one planned it. The tree didn't ask for our permission or guidance. The clouds didn't consult us when to fill with rain and when to rain.

The clouds did not sync their calendars with ours. They did not let us control them. There is uncertainty all around us. Falling trees in the woods couldn't care less about our plans, could they?

[ 4 : 01 ] And life happens. It happens to us. And it happens around us. It doesn't mean that nobody knows the rhyme or reason for things.

No. Verse 5. God makes everything. He works by his spirit secretly in hidden places. In places that we can't see. Like in a mother's womb.

But from our point of view, do you see the point he's making? Our problem is that we try to treat the uncertainties out there as if they can be certain. As if we could watch and control and analyse and plan so that everything in our lives runs well.

But life just happens. Constant analysing, though, can be paralysing. Just look at verse 4.

He who observes the wind will not sow. And he who regards the clouds will not reap. Now do you see what the man is doing there? He's putting analysis ahead of action, isn't he?

[ 5 : 08 ] Observing, regarding, but he's not doing anything. He's hesitating. He's waiting for ideal conditions. And too much observing, too much trying to control the uncertainties of life can actually obstruct productivity and harvest.

Even with all of our analysis, plenty of things will still be hidden to us in our lives, won't they? Even the Met Office gets it wrong. Frequently. Few great enterprises have waited, actually, for ideal conditions.

And if you spend all of your time waiting for them, you might never do anything. Hardly anything is ideal, is it? But we pretend that it can be and that we can do it.

I think we struggle with this today with Google. We Google, don't we, all the data before we make any decisions. And then once we've made the decision, we think, well, what if there's one more bit of data?

One more piece of information that I haven't found yet that will invalidate my current decision. But he who keeps observing the wind won't ever sow.

[ 6 : 22 ] Do you see what he does here with the uncertainties of life in verse 1 to 6? He pairs them, doesn't he, with a particular response that he's telling us to make.

Instead of reservation and fear and constant analysis and to-ing and fro-ing, the response is, go for it.

It's enterprise, isn't it? There's a buoyancy. Just go for it. Cast your bread upon the waters, he says. It's not about feeding the ducks, by the way.

What is he talking about there? It could be sowing seed in the floodplains. It could be about sending resources out onto ships for investment.

It's difficult to know precisely what he means. It's difficult to know whether he's talking about business investment or just giving to others. Like he says in verse 2, give a portion to 7 or even to 8.

[ 7 : 32 ] It could be both, actually, couldn't it? Either way, if you don't embark on something because of uncertainty, you know you definitely won't get a return.

But if you do cast your bread, you know there's a good chance you will. Life is uncertain. You could respond, couldn't you, by getting everything that is owed to you, all of your just desserts, and eating them all really quickly because you don't know what's in the future.

Or, he says, you could give your desserts away. Because one day everything you have might be taken from you. You don't know how long it's going to last. I used to cycle around Ealing a lot before I had both of my wheels stolen.

On the second bike that I bought, after the first one was stolen outside the council, during a lunchtime talk. It's just infuriating, isn't it? Someone in our church, you know her well, most of you, had her wallet stolen on the bus.

Coming to ELT a couple of weeks ago, she'd lost, I think, £1,000 in 15 minutes. As they'd gone and contactless payments everywhere.

[ 8 : 47 ] It's almost worth catching the thief, isn't it? Just to give them what for. It's so infuriating. But on reflection, as I think about my wheels, the real frustration of losing things like that is that I had the chance to give it away.

I'd have preferred, if I could go back in time, the other option would have been better to just give it to them. Or give it to somebody else.

I'd have preferred to give the money away. That would have been better. I'm no better off. But someone else could have been. I could have cast it on the water.

I could have used it in some other way for good. Rather than keeping it to myself. Rather than locking it away. He's not advocating irresponsibility or bravado with our resources.

And it is your money. It's your stuff. It's your resources. To do with it what you want and what you decide. And that really is fine. It really is. But you never know what is going to happen.

[ 10 : 00 ] And the time for casting and giving and sowing might not last very long. And the motto of our lives, if it is what if, it could change to, I could have.

I could have given it away. I could have been generous. That would have been better. I could have invested in something that lasts. He's saying, isn't he, life is predictably unpredictable.

So be bold. Go on, I dare you. He says. Give to a missionary. Serve in the local church. Use your gifts.

Invest in things. Spend time with people. Spend time with someone in need. Give them your desserts. Literally, if you like.

Cast your bread. Because you don't know what's going to happen. Don't keep making excuses. Analyzing can be so paralyzing, can't it?

[ 11 : 05 ] It's too early. It's too late. Too hot. Too cold. You can spend all of your life, though, waiting for ideal conditions and never do anything.

I could have. So be bold with the uncertainties. Secondly, he says, be bold with the certainties. Be bold with the certainties. Someone has said, commenting on this passage, that we can treat the uncertainties of life as if they were certain, but we can also treat the certainties as if they were uncertain.

We can pretend that the certain might never happen. There are some things that we can't predict. That's true. But there are other things that we know will happen to us without a doubt. And so the flip side is, let the certain things of the future and of life shape how you deal with the uncertain things.

[ 12 : 14 ] And this is what he does in verse 9 to the end. He speaks to a young person, doesn't he, at the beginning of their life. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth.

Verse 9. Young person, young man, pay attention to the certainties that you are going to face, that all of us will face at some point.

Did you hear the certainties that he talks about? He's quite frank about them, isn't he? The frustration of an ageing body, the certainty of pain, and the certainty of judgment before God. Those things are going to happen to all of us. But just as with the uncertainties, the response is still the same. Be bold.

Be bold. It's a different side to the same coin, really. Because it's just as foolish to do nothing by pretending that the certainties won't happen as it is to think that the uncertainties will.

[ 13 : 24 ] So the young person needs to be bold in enjoying the opportunities that youth gives. Let your heart cheer you, he says.

Enjoy your youth. Enjoy what remains of it. And again, he mixes the reality of our certainties with our response. He mixes the certain boundaries that we are going to face with a call to enjoy bliss. Enjoy the sun while you've still got young eyes. Enjoy the sweetness of light. Let your heart cheer you. Don't be miserable. These things will certainly happen to you one day. So enjoy the bliss of youth now. Those of us who are more mature in years of life really understand what he's saying here.

We feel like screaming with the preacher. Don't we? And maybe the lessons you've learnt getting older, maybe you wish you'd learnt them earlier.

[ 14 : 33 ] Maybe you wish you could sort of go back in a time machine and speak to your younger self and shout at yourself and shout at younger people and say, what you had then, what you have now is precious.

Some of you are really feeling like you're getting alongside the preacher here. The body maybe isn't quite as cooperative as it once was. Going to bed with aches and pains and confusion.

You know what he means, don't you? You know what he means more than anybody else here. That the saying is so often true that youth is wasted on the young. Young person, let the certainties of old age determine how you live, how you grab life and cast your bread on the waters.

Don't waste your life. Don't waste your youth. Don't waste it on video games and on triviality. I think as well, he does speak to anyone, even if we're older in years, anyone who enjoys the faculties of youth still in older age.

You can be young at heart, can't you? While you still have some of those faculties that you used to have, he says to you as well, enjoy them.

[ 15 : 55 ] Use them. Enjoy the life that God has given you. Don't waste them even now. Because one day you will lose them, and that's certain.

You will lose life altogether. We all will. It is quite striking how he speaks of the certainty of God's judgment here in verse 9.

He brings it in. Let's read that. Walk in the weight of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know that for these things God will bring you into judgment.

Now, the context here is really unusual and interesting because he speaks of judgment in the context of enjoyment, doesn't he?

And it sheds a different light on God's judgment. When we hear that word, judgment, I don't know what you think. I think we naturally think God is a killjoy, that he will judge all of our evil acts, and

gladly God does judge evil, doesn't he?

[17:01] But he also judges our enjoyment here. He will not only judge our evil acts, but he will judge what we've done with good things that he's given us in life.

He says, young person, grab life and enjoy your youth because God will judge how you enjoy it. So strange, isn't it? Because this life is a gift from God, as he said time and time and again.

And any gift that we give to somebody, it's an offence if it's not opened and enjoyed, isn't it? It's awful.

I know I've done this when I've given a gift and I've given a gift to a person and I've gone to visit them some days later and that gift isn't there and then I've seen it in someone else's house.

So they've re-gifted it and it's still unopened in their house as well. That's quite hurtful. They haven't enjoyed it, they haven't opened it.

[18:09] And God is not delighted when we get life from him and we leave it unopened and we sort of stash it in the attic. I think it's been a mistake of Christians in the past of living a harsh life brought upon themselves.

It's called asceticism of wearing sort of Hessian cloaks and hitting themselves with nettles and stuff. It's kind of sadomasochistic life. And there is a false pride in that because enjoyment here is not just permitted for some crazy Christians, it's commanded for all.

And not enjoying life and not opening life up is an offence to the giver of it. I want to say being miserable is a sin because it shows you that you don't actually think that much of the giver of life.

And you won't count your blessings, you'd rather just list all of your complaints to him. President Roosevelt gave a famous speech called The Strenuous Life in 1899.

And he was speaking to high flyers in society at the Hamilton Club in Chicago. And he said this, Far better it is to dare mighty things to win glorious triumphs even though chequered by failure than it is to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much because they live in the grey twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.

[19:50] Sometimes you don't know what's going to happen. Uncertainties. And with many things we do know things are going to happen.

Judgment and the end of life. Either way be bold the preacher says. Get out of the twilight of indecision and of procrastination of putting things off.

Just as we close it strikes us in this passage that much of what the preacher is saying here is about our mentality towards life isn't it?

It is not about having a kind of sucking everything in as gain mentality but a giving out mentality casting giving and sowing.

And it's the whole concept isn't it that giving away that throwing out that sending out our life and our resources is better than hoarding and keeping and holding.

[20:51] Giving is better than receiving. He takes language from business and agriculture of sowing and so on. And in those situations God has set the world up in such a way as to teach us a lesson.

That growth happens when we give away. Think about it. Unless you throw seeds out, that little bit of food in your hand, if you get rid of it it comes back to you, doesn't it?

Unless you throw it out there's no growth. And you've got to take the risk of losing something, of losing seeds to get bread back.

You've actually got to bury seeds, haven't you? You've got to watch them die in the ground before it comes back to life and gives you food. And that whole experience in other areas of life can be so hard.

It can feel so risky, can't it? Just stepping out. because we want control and we want things fenced in. But life comes when we die, he's saying here, when we die to self.

[22:10] And that is a great summary really of the Christian life. You see on your sheets the second reading there from John's Gospel. Jesus speaks about his own death and he says the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified and he picks up the idea of seeds.

Very truly I tell you unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies it remains only a single seed so I've got a different version.

But if it dies it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Now of course Jesus is speaking there about general principles but he's speaking specifically about himself and he is the one who has lived out Ecclesiastes 11 to the

nth degree.

He's the one who's willingly cast not just his money and his stuff but his whole life, his whole existence out upon the waters.

He's cast and give and sown. He speaks of his own death and yet paradoxically he calls it the moment of his glory.

[ 23 : 27 ] Jesus was not ruled by what ifs and he now never can say I could have could he?

And now look at him enthroned in glory. So don't hoard life, unwrap it, enjoy life where you can and how you can saying thank you to the giver and be bold.

Go on, I dare you, says the preacher. Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.