

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] Please turn back in your Bibles to Ecclesiastes 11, page 559 if you've closed your Bibles. To us in the experience of our lives and the realities that we face, we ask that you would do this for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, we're all in search of a good life. That's what we want. That's what those of you that are younger and are looking ahead and thinking about universities and futures and careers, really the goal is a good life.

You want to live well in the world. That's what politicians are always promising us. They say, if you vote for me, we will give you a good life. We will deliver the sorts of things that will give your life the sort of meaning and purpose and joy that you want.

That's what Rachel Reeves thinks that this budget will deliver for British people. That's what Donald Trump ran on the promise of as he was elected this past week.

He actually didn't just want to deliver the good life for American people, but the great life. We're told that a vote for him was a vote for a healthier, wealthier, safer America.

[1 : 45] And people voted for him because that's what they want. That is the great human quest, a life that goes well, a life that has purpose and that is imbued with joy and satisfaction, a life of flourishing.

At one level or another, all of us make the choices we do, make the decisions that we do, because that's what we want. That's what we're searching for in this life.

And Solomon has told us from the start of this really rather enigmatic book that he is just like us. Ecclesiastes chapter 2 verse 3, I searched with my heart till I might see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

I'm searching for the good life, he's saying. And we've seen he has searched and searched and searched.

He's tried everything, he's told us. We've seen he looked, first of all, at the cycle of life. He thought maybe wisdom is the way to go, and so he searched out wisdom.

[2 : 56] And he's given himself to pleasure and wealth and hard work, and he has explored then whether honor and respect will deliver the joy and significance that he is seeking. He said, these things are the things that people tell us will deliver the good life.

I am going to road test every single one of them. He's turned every stone that there is to turn, and we've seen that his conclusion has been consistent the whole way through.

It's all vanity. All of it. It's all vapor. That's what the word translated vanity, meaningless in some translations.

It's vapor, foggy vapor. He's saying there's nothing there. And the more that you grasp after it, the more you realize how thin the mist actually is.

You know, sometimes when you get a heavy fog, you don't maybe get it so much in the city, anymore, but when you get a really heavy fog, and they call it a real pea super, because you can't see, and you feel like in a really heavy fog, almost like you could lean against it and it would hold you up.

[4 : 03] Well, what he's saying here, what Solomon is saying is that there is a mist. It doesn't hold you up. In fact, when you grasp after it, it is handfuls of vapor.

It is fistfuls of nothing. And yet, there's been a drumbeat, hasn't there, the whole way through the letter that gives us hope that the search for the good life is not a vain search.

Play on words. Chapter 2, verse 24, there is nothing better, he says, for a person than he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. Chapter 5, 18, behold, what I have seen to be good, okay, we're listening, good and fitting, is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which

one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him.

8, 15, and I commend joy, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun.

9, verse 9, enjoy life with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun.

[5 : 23] What is the good life, Solomon? Eat your food, drink your wine, and enjoy them. See, when you know, as the Christian does, that God is in complete control of absolutely everything in the world, that you have what you have because he has given it to you, that you don't have what you don't have because he has kept it from you, well, you can receive the gifts that he gives and you can say thank you and you can enjoy them.

Gratitude and trust. Gratitude and trust. They are the two, they are the touchstone, you could say, of the whole Christian faith. Gratitude for what you have and trust God for what you don't have. Gratitude for the things that you enjoy and trust God for the things that are difficult and a struggle. Now, our temptation, of course, is to grasp, is to grasp after these things, to do that thing of trying to grab the things that Solomon has told us are vapor.

We want to gain in some way. We want to advance ourselves. Use these things in order to secure our position. Make us the center of things. We go after these things hoping that they will be the means by which we can control our lives and we can deliver happiness.

But that's not the life of faith. It's all a gift. And we are to receive what we have as such. And we're to be thankful.

[6 : 59] But you'll notice, you'll notice as we've gone through that it's not just eating and drinking that Solomon wants us to enjoy, but also something he calls toil. Each of those exhortations that I read for you that kind of are these little sound bites at different points as we go through the book, each one of those includes a call to enjoy our toil, our labor.

Indeed, that is part of the programmatic verse I mentioned from chapter 2, verse 3. I searched with my heart till I could see what was good for the children of man to do under heaven during the few days of their life.

And Solomon hasn't really expanded on what that to do means, of what the toil actually is, until Ecclesiastes chapter 11, 1 to 6.

See, he's bringing the plane into land. And as his descent towards the conclusion of this book comes around, he tells us what the good of our toil should be.

And it's a summary of how we are to live the good life. You could say it's a practical summary of the life of faith. And there are two elements. Point number one, he tells us, admit what you don't know.

[8 : 13] Admit what you don't know. Did you notice 11, 1 to 6, Solomon repeats that phrase. Verse 2, you know not. Verse 5, you do not know.

You do not know. And again, verse 6, you do not know. There is so much about this life of which we are ignorant.

Think about how limited our knowledge is, how little we know of ourselves, how little we know of other people. All the things we are ignorant about, how ignorant we are of the deep state, of God Himself.

There are so many questions that we could ask one another. And the honest answer is, I don't know. But how often are we prepared to do that?

We don't like doing that. We don't like recognizing that there are limits to our knowledge. Now, of course, if I was to ask you the question, do you know everything there is to know in the world, you would say, no, of course I don't.

[9 : 23] But then I ask you another question, and you don't know, but you give an opinion. Because it's really important that you're seen to have an opinion. But recognizing these limits is a vital part of true wisdom.

That's what Solomon is saying. But 25 years ago, I knew a guy, and his name was Dave. But in our group of friends, he was known as, I know.

In fact, back when I used to put people's nicknames in my phone, and when I put somebody's name in my phone, I put their nickname in, it came up, I know. Anytime anyone commented on something in conversation, they might have seen, they might have heard, quite apart from whether Dave was around or not, his response was always, I know.

Or, I thought that. You say, I see they're closing the road for maintenance next week. I know. It became a running joke. In fact, we would invent things to get him just to say it. Scandalous things made up about celebrities, politicians, famous people. Did you see such and such has turned into a frog? I know. I saw that. The truth is, we can all be a bit like that in our own ways.

[10:39] We don't want to admit that we have limits to our understanding and our knowledge. And Solomon is clear here that whatever we do know, there are some things that are simply beyond us.

There are some things that you can't know yourself and you can't Google to find the answer. And he highlights three very obvious areas. Verse 2, first of all, we are ignorant about the future. Give a portion to seven or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on the earth. Now, we'll see in a minute he's talking about generosity here, and the reason that we should be generous people, he's saying, is because we don't actually know what lies in the future. Those poor people in Spain last week, their diaries were filled with plans. And those plans were washed away, literally, in the floods.

You could leave here this evening and get home and get into bed as you expect to do, and I hope that does happen, or you could leave here, you could drop down with a heart attack, or you could be crossing the road and one of those maniacs on an electric scooter could take you out.

[11:53] It could be the end of your life. You could be, the rest of your life could be significantly different than you'd hoped. You don't know. All those things that are in your diary, will you get to attend those meetings?

Will you get to go on those holidays? Will you get to make that call or see that person for lunch? You don't know. We're ignorant about the future.

Solomon also says we're ignorant about the work of God. Verse 5, 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 know that life begins at conception. We know that a baby is formed in their mother's womb. We know that cells divide to form a hand over here and an eye over here.

But we don't know how life is created. We don't know how these things happen. There are some things that only God, the maker of everything, knows.

[13:02] This was his point when he spoke to Job from the storm. Job 38, Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Asking it in a way as if to say, Well, of course you haven't.

I'm the only one that's done that. Where is the way to the dwelling of light and where is the place of darkness? Only God knows those things. I often hear people say things like, Well, I believe God will do this or I believe God will do that.

We've no idea. One of the big themes about the book of Ecclesiastes is some of what we were hearing this morning from Acts chapter 4. God is in complete sovereign control of absolutely every single detail of the world and we don't know why he works things out the way he does.

We've no idea. Thirdly, we're ignorant about the outcome of our work. Solomon tells us, Verse 6, Work hard, we're told.

Get the grades, we're told. Then you'll get the job, the good job that you'd like. Put the work in, in the good job, and then you'll be set. That's what we're told. You'll be set.

[14:21] Will you? Will you? You don't know. And just because it worked that way for other people is neither here nor there. We all know people who followed the right advice, did all the right things, and failed.

I remember talking to an investor who wasn't a Christian, but he understood this. He'd been investing for many years and he said to me, I don't know why some businesses I've backed have flown and why others have flopped.

I used the same criteria to decide. I only invest where I like the people, where the books were good, and where the product seemed like a good product. But one does well and the other fails.

He said, it's a mystery. That is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes 11. Our pursuit, in our pursuit of the good life, wisdom requires us to admit what we don't know.

It doesn't mean, of course, that we pursue ignorance. We're not trying to be stupid or that we consider not knowing. Like, some people, I think, maybe some Christians, think that ignorance is a virtue in some way.

[15:29] They can spiritualize it. Solomon is not saying that it is godly to be ignorant. Of course he's not. We should pursue knowledge and we should especially pursue knowledge of God. We should pursue the knowledge of God, which is a knowledge that we will never fully exhaust, but we should do it so that we know His ways better.

But there will always be a white spot on the map when it comes to our understanding of God's providence. Admit what we don't know.

But while we do that, while we admit our limits, Solomon doesn't want us just to sit on our hands. There is a positive toil that he wants us to lean into and to enjoy as well. So here's the second point. Act on what you do know. Act on what you do know. Solomon has told us that God is in complete sovereign control over every detail of life. He has repeatedly told us that we must live by faith in this reality if we will experience the joy that he keeps talking about.

The question is, what does a life of faith actually look like? What does it involve? Well, again, we have three commitments. Verses 1 and 2, first of all, he commends to us risky generosity.

[16:43] Risky generosity. Cast your bread upon the waters for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven or even to eight. Casting your bread on the water sounds to me like quite a strange idiom.

Conjures up images in my mind of feeding ducks in the park, throwing them some moldy crusts and watching them go soggy. So it's a bit strange. But what he's doing here is actually describing giving to other people and giving probably to those who are in need in some way.

And he's saying, do that with great generosity. The number seven, you will know, is the biblical number of perfection. And he's saying that you should even go beyond that. He's kind of using hyperbole.

Don't just go as far as you can. Go even further. He's saying, go to eight. It's a call to take risks as you invest in other people. It is a call to relinquish selfish control of your own life and your own possessions.

He is saying the Christian is to live their life with open hands. Be generous with what you have. Remember, it's gift, not gain.

[17:58] Now, one of the interesting things about this is that he doesn't just say, go and be really, really generous. Do you notice? Cast your bread upon the waters for you will find it after many days.

See, part of the reason that we live with open hands is because the casting brings a return. Cast your bread for you will find it. The Christian knows that to give to others, especially the needy, is actually to give to the Lord.

Proverbs 19, whoever is generous to the poor lends to Yahweh, lends to God, and he will repay him for his deed. One commentator says this, Solomon is issuing a call to be boldly generous and lavishly good to our neighbors.

This is the epitome of wisdom, even though it looks like a losing proposition. Wisdom does not walk by faith, but by sight. See what he's done there?

That's the key to any generosity, you see. Do we trust God to keep his word? We could hear this sort of thing, you know, give to the poor and you will find it again after many days.

[19:14] You know, if I give a bit over here, well, I might get a bit more back over here. There are certain theologies that would espouse that kind of nonsense. We're not trying to make our generosity come back to us because that's not being generous.

Nor is it the life of faith. It's the life of seeking to control God in some way which when we put it like that actually sounds like a life of folly, doesn't it? I am going to seek to pursue controlling God.

That is the absolute epitome of madness. What he's saying here is we are to be generous in a way that feels risky but it is surrendered to the will and providence of God.

Isn't that what Jesus said in Luke chapter 6? Luke 6, 35, Do good and lend expecting nothing in return and your reward will be great and you will be sons of the Most High for He is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

Verse 38, Luke 6, 38, Give and it will be given to you good measure pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap for the measure you use it will be measured back to you. Those who are generous without any desire to gain themselves end up gaining because that's the way the upside down nature of the kingdom of God.

[20 : 39] Same principle of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 9, Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver.

Be generous and do it with a smile on your face he's saying. Risky, and the only way that's possible, risky generosity is only possible if it is kind of coming out of a confident faith.

Faith that God is in complete control of our lives, that we have what we have and we don't have what we don't because of him. And it's a faith that he will keep his promise to provide and return our generosity with blessing.

So what are you doing to be generous to others, especially those who are in need? One of the things I think we often do is we think to ourselves, well, I think if, I know I need to be generous and I'm really keen to do that, but I think it would be better if I waited until I was in a better place financially in order to be generous then, you know, when I get to that point then, well, I'll have that much in the bank and then I'll be able to do it.

Now, each of us, of course, must give according to our means and according to our conscience, but we are supplied by God's abundance. So what we're really talking about here is faith.

[22 : 07] It is trusting God that we can be generous with whatever we have, however much it is, however much or however little, we can be generous with that, trusting that God will supply.

You can be generous, you can even be extravagant in your generosity because you know that God is faithful and He has been abundantly generous to you. We heard this morning about being bold and not giving way to fear as it comes to living out our Christian life and speaking boldly about the Lord Jesus.

That principle applies here as well. We should be bold in our faith in trusting God as we are generous. His word calls us to do that that He will supply.

Risky generosity. Secondly, Solomon calls us to a realistic busyness. Verses 3 and 4, a realistic busyness. 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. There are some things that are predictable in life, like when the clouds come in, we can assume that rain will follow and there are some things that are unpredictable like when and where a tree will fall in the forest.

[23 : 25] And Solomon is saying that's how it is in the world. We've got to be realistic about that. And that should change nothing about how hard we work. I had a quick visit to Belfast this week and when we came in to land in Belfast, it was grey and wet and the person on the front said, you know, welcome to Belfast.

Well, I'm afraid that the rain has arrived just ahead of us. Of course it has. It's Northern Ireland. What did he expect? It's not the Bahamas.

It's grey and wet all the time in Northern Ireland. And yet, the country is full of people who still fire into their work every day regardless.

Solomon's saying, don't look out the window and say, well, it looks like rain today. I don't think I'm going to work. Oh, it's a bit bluey. We can't work today. He's saying, work hard.

Be busy in the things that God has given you to do. That includes the generosity that Solomon has just mentioned because another thing that Solomon is getting at here with this kind of looking at the wind and, you know, holding back from actually getting stuck into your work because you're looking at the weather and wondering, will it work out and everything else?

[24 : 44] He's saying, look, don't be anxious about that when it comes to generosity either. Remember, don't fear that you're going to be left short in some way.

Get on with being generous as well as everything else. He's saying, waiting for the point at which you can read the way the wind is blowing and therefore can then live without risks or, to put it another way, to live without having to trust God because that's the opposite, isn't it, of the life of faith.

He's saying, that's not the call for the Christian. Get after what it is that you're supposed to do, whatever the weather. Metaphorically and actually. If you're waiting for a fair wind in your life and whatever kind of call the Lord has put on your life, if you're waiting for that, you'll never get anything done.

Some days, we've got to go and graft in the rain and push against the wind and some days, it is a bit easier. But he's saying, look, you've got to be realistic. This is the world we live in. Let's get busy anyway about the things that God has given us to do. The third element of enjoyable toil. First is risky generosity.

[26 : 00] The second is realistic busyness. And the third, he says, reasonable diversity. Five to six. Reasonable diversity. 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.

Sowing seed, on the one hand, withholding not your hand. Those are two different pursuits actually. One is this, the other is that. Solomon is making that clear. So what he's really saying here is you think about your life, as you think about the things that you throw yourself into, don't put all your eggs into the one basket.

We might call it pursuing a diverse portfolio. Not necessarily just financial investments, but just develop a side hustle in your work.

Seek to find ways to be productive. Work hard. You don't know what might come of it. You don't know what God might do with your efforts. There are lots of good things that you could throw yourself into.

Now, of course, those things have to kind of take their place among the priorities that you have, the commitments that you have. But he's saying, get after it.

[27 : 09] What he's doing, actually, is pressing us to do the very opposite of what we might think or what we might be tempted to think in this world of Hevel, this world of vapor. See, you might think, if everything is vapor, well, there's no point working hard.

But what he's saying here is actually, vapor is a motivation. It's kind of counterintuitive. Our ignorance and lack of control that he's just emphasized, alongside the possibility of disaster, verse 2, you do not know what disaster may happen on the earth.

So, these are a couple of really significant realities. We don't know loads of stuff. We don't have any control over the world in which we live. Disasters do happen in this world, and we might be tempted to think to ourselves, you know what, I'm going to lock the doors, I'm going to stay at home, I'm going to try and just be as safe as I possibly can.

And he's saying, no, the opposite is true. Get after it, work hard, hustle, give generously, and serve others, and trust all the while the outcome to God.

That's the good life. That is, Solomon's words, what is good for the children of man to do under heaven the few days of our lives.

[28 : 29] Admit what you don't know, and act on what you do with a generosity and a busyness that is all the time submitted to God, trusting the outcome to him.

The question we have is, well, does this actually work? Can we actually really call this the good life? You see, it's a vision of life that's quite different from what we're given in other places, isn't it?

Our culture wouldn't call that the good life. So we need to define what we mean by the good life, because the truth of the matter is, this was the life that was embodied by the Lord Jesus.

The one who is the way, the truth, and the life. The Lord Jesus lived a life of absolute generosity, giving, giving, and giving again, trusting his Father with the outcome.

In his humanity, Jesus was subject to the vapor of this life just as we are. In his humanity, he didn't know exactly how every twist and turn of his story was going to work out, but he pressed on.

[29 : 34] Remember, he wrestled with his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. In that moment, he was anxious about, you could say, casting his bread upon the waters. In this case, that bread was his body, the bread of life.

But he gave it over, not my will, but yours be done. He gave it over as he surrendered to the cross, and in doing so, he purchased life for the world.

How did it go for him and then, after that, well, three days later, he was vindicated as the Father raised him from the dead and ushered him in to resurrection life.

Solomon's wisdom was embodied in the Lord Jesus Christ. So, it's not just wise advice for us, but it has been confirmed as the path that actually brings life that is truly life.

It's the path to resurrection glory. So, that is why when Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him, to embrace the generous pattern of life, the pattern of my life for yours, which is essentially the banner over all of this, that's the way of toil in Ecclesiastes 11.

[30 : 47] When he calls us to do that, we should lean in. We should trust him. We should live by faith because we know that actually, in the end, the return is worth it.

See, that's where this all lands for us. In the end, when we embrace this pattern of life, when we say, I don't know this, but I'm trusting you, and when we say, I'm going to lean in to what you've called me to do in a pattern of generous service, we're following the example of the Lord Jesus, but we do that confidently, full of faith, because we know that is the path to resurrection glory.

That's the path of life. That's the good life. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.