

Taking Calculated Risks and Enjoying Youth

📖 Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

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In Ecclesiastes Solomon is explaining that while wisdom is not the answer for everything, it does give us an advantage in life. He's described why wisdom is better than foolishness and last time he described wisdom's ability to give us an advantage by controlling the tongue. The tongue is a very sharp and dangerous instrument. If uncontrolled it can easily set one's whole life on fire. At the same time, it can be used to build others up. It is, therefore, an enigma unlike anything in nature, like a well that gushes forth fresh and salt water. It is also remarkable in its effects, because it is so small and yet it can control our whole lives. So it is essential that we get wisdom in order to control it.

As far as the details of wisdom and the tongue, in Ecclesiastes 10:12-15 Solomon teaches that the wise man chooses his words carefully and he does not multiply them, like the fool. Verse 12, "Words from the mouth of a wise man are gracious, while the lips of a fool consume him." While it's true that a wise man's words may be gracious toward others, the Hebrew is saying the words of "a wise man win him favor." His words gain him favor with God and men, giving him a good reputation. But "the lips of a fool consume him." That means they overcome or destroy him, in the sense that they bring him to ruin. His reputation is ruined with God and men. In verse 13 we see how the fool's speech brings him to ruin: "the beginning of his talking is folly and the end of it is wicked madness. Yet the fool multiplies words." In the Hebrew this is a tricolon, meaning three quick expressions to show that from beginning to end the fool's speech is craziness, and then after all is said and done, he keeps on spouting madness. In verse 14b we learn that his madness concerns what will happen in the future. He is going on and on about what is going to happen next. But, as Solomon points out, "No man knows what will happen, and who can tell him what will come after him?" So the fool goes on and on in his speculations, but he doesn't know what is coming because no one knows what will happen next. In verse 15 the fool is so verbose that it is as wearisome as a job and at the end of the day he does not know how to go to the city." He can't find his way home, even though the roads of the ancient world were well-marked. It was a figure of speech playing up just how stupid the fool really was. So, the lesson of verses 12-15 is that we should get wisdom in order to control our speech so that we gain favor with God and men and avoid being a fool who talks so much his ignorance brings him to ruin. In Ecclesiastes 10:16-20 Solomon teaches that wisdom protects us from cursing political rulers, and

that this holds true whether the ruler and his administration are competent or not. In verse 16 we see an incompetent ruler and his licentious administration. "Woe to you, O land, whose king is a lad and whose princes feast in the morning." The lad is not necessarily a young man, but rather a commoner, one not trained from youth in how to rule a kingdom. His princes are licentious, partying all night long into the morning, the very time they were to be in the courts delivering justice. This will not be good for the people of that kingdom. Thus, he pronounces woe upon them. In verse 17 we see the opposite picture, a competent ruler and his productive administration. "Blessed are you, O land, whose king is of nobility and whose princes eat at the appropriate time—for strength and not for drunkenness." The king of nobility arises from a dynastic line. His father reigned before him and he has been trained from youth how to rule a people well. Likewise, the men in his administration live orderly lives, eating at the appropriate time so that they can fulfill their duties well in the dispensing of the king's orders and justice in the courts. Blessing is pronounced on those who live under such a king and administration. In verse 18 he returns to describe in more detail the rule of the incompetent king and his unprincipled administration. "Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks." In other words, because the unprincipled administration is so lazy, the kingdom is neglected and begins to fall into disorder. Verse 19 is their attitude toward ruling, "Men prepare a meal for enjoyment, and wine makes life merry, and money is the answer to everything." In other words, they prepare banquets for merrymaking, they add wine to make them drunk, and how do they think all the problems of the kingdom will be fixed? With money. Just raise taxes in order to throw money at everything in order to fix it. Woe to the people of a kingdom whose leadership spends all their time partying and throwing money at problems, as if money is a solve all. It is not. Yet, even though your nation may be ruled by such incompetency and lasciviousness, verse 20 reveals the path of wisdom. It may seem right to dishonor the king, but wisdom will refrain from this course. "In your bedchamber do not curse a king, and in your sleeping rooms do not curse a rich man, for a bird of the heavens will carry the sound and the winged creature will make the matter known." Wisdom says refrain from maligning the king and his administration, despite their incompetence to rule, as this will come back to haunt you, as word will reach the higher ups and you will have to pay the consequences. So then, we can disagree with the policies and decisions that come out of the oval office, but it is not a safe course to disparage the ruler himself and his administration. In part this is due to the repercussions, but additionally, they are made in the image and likeness of God, and there is a due respect for all men simply because they are made in His image. Therefore, the teaching here is a certain dignity to us all as image bearers of God. And further, word could get back to the ruler and then we would have to answer to him. So, the lesson of verses 16-20 is that we should get wisdom because it will control our speech when it comes to an incompetent ruler and his administration who are leading our kingdom to ruin, and thereby will protect us.

We come tonight to Eccl 11:1-7 and here Solomon is approaching the climax of the book in 11:7-12:14. Before the climax he gives some additional examples of how wisdom gives us an advantage in light of an uncertain future. Three times in these verses he says, "You do not know..." to emphasize that nobody knows the future.

Since no one knows what is going to happen next, we need to be willing to take calculated risks if we are to make any headway. Taking calculated risks is the path of wisdom. To illustrate, Solomon uses two risky professions in the ancient world; maritime trade and farming, but the principles apply equally to any modern profession. In 11:1-2 he looks at a merchant who has the prospect of expanding his business by maritime trade, a risky venture given the dangers of the open seas. We read in 11:1, **Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days.** Instead of saying **Cast your bread on the surface of the waters,** which sounds more like feeding the fish, the Hebrew is saying "Send your grain overseas," meaning, if you are a merchant, export your products overseas in shipping vessels, although the idea is included that one's grain shipped across the open seas could become fish food. Great risk is taken when one decides to expand his business by exporting his produce. There is no guarantee on the open seas. No one knows what is going to happen. The ship could get caught in a storm, pirates could raid the ship and all could come to naught. So the businessman is faced with the prospect of great risk, yet Solomon says **Cast your bread on the surface of the waters,** take the risk. Why? **for you will find it after many days.** That is, **after many days** you will get a return. It may take a while, but eventually you will make a profit.

However, in order to ensure you make a profit in light of the unknown, in verse 2 he says, **Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.** What this means is a bit unclear, but the basic meaning is ship your products on **seven, or even eight** ships. The Hebrew 7 and 7+1 was a way of sufficiently and more than sufficiently. Hubbard said, "'Seven or eight' is a Hebrew numerical formula called X, X + 1. It occurs frequently in Proverbs (chaps. 6, 30) and in the first two chapters of Amos. Here it is not to be taken literally but means 'plenty and more than plenty,' 'the widest possible diversification within the guidelines of prudence. . . .' Seven means 'plenty,' and eight means, 'Go a bit beyond that.'" In modern parlance, we would say, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket!" This is in keeping with wisdom since **you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.** There is wisdom in calculating for risk. So send your products on seven or eight different ships, engage in multiple ventures at the same time, and why? To help mitigate losses that are sure to take place. We live in a fallen world and we do not know what is going to happen next. So we may summarize verses 1 and 2 as teaching that wisdom says take risk, but not just any risk, putting all your eggs in one basket would be too risky, you could lose everything, therefore, take calculated risk. Make that a part of your planning in order to mitigate loss. It's okay to plan, just make sure you figure the plan of God into your plan.

Now, Solomon knew that people would read about the coming misfortunes and decide not to take any risk at all, and in that way think they can protect themselves from the difficulties of dealing with disappointments, so he gives more instruction through an illustration of a farmer. Verse 3, **If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies.** The point here is that there are things that are beyond the farmer's control. He can't know what the weather holds for the future, so he can't know when to plant or when to reap. These things are unpredictable.

When will **the clouds be full** so that **they will pour out rain upon the earth**? Nobody knows these things. They are in the hand of God. The farmer did not want it to rain while he was reaping his fields because then the harvest would get wet and come to ruin. And who knows when a strong wind is going to blow causing a newly planted **tree to fall toward the south or toward the north**, so that **wherever the tree falls, there it lies**? Nobody knows when these things will happen. And if it happened then all that work would be for nothing. So, one response is to not do anything at all. Isn't it true that many people have given up the farming enterprise because of the unknown timing of catastrophes that destroy the crop? Why even try? Just do nothing.

This person is described in verse 4, **He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap**. They just stand there watching **the wind**, waiting till they think the conditions are perfect for planting. Or watching the **clouds** to try to decide the perfect time for **reaping**. This is inactivity and the one guarantee of inactivity is that it can never lead to productivity. So here is a guaranteed plan of failure, don't **sow** and don't **reap**.

Verse 5 describes how incapable we are of looking at weather patterns and predicting the best time to sow and reap. **Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things**. He uses a comparison between not knowing the path of the wind or how bones are formed in the womb of a pregnant woman to not knowing the activity of God who does all these things. There is simply no way of **knowing the path the wind** will take, whether it will blow north or south. We live in a particularly windy place in the NW portion of our county and I have seen the wind blowing north one day at 20mph and south the next at 30mph. And I wish I could have predicted those changes, but I could not. You just don't know. Likewise, I can't know **how bones are formed in the womb of a pregnant woman**, in that little baby, how certain cells lose their potential so that they are diversified from other cells to specialize in the formation of bones rather than soft tissues. You and I do not know how this takes place. In the same way, **you and I do not know the activity of God who does all** these things. **They are simply beyond** our ability to figure out. All we can do is speculate about what is coming, make our best guess. But we do not know. The result of contemplating that thought is that many people just don't do anything. I mean, why take the risk, knowing that misfortune can occur and all our efforts will have been in vain? As smart as that may seem, that is the path of the fool.

Wisdom says be diligent in your labor despite the unknown future. Verse 6, **Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good**. In other words, be diligent in your labor. Don't stand around and try to predict the best time for sowing, diversify and sow both **in the morning** and **in the evening**. The reason is because **you do not know which sowing will succeed, or whether both of them...will be good**. But you do know that if you just stand around and do nothing you won't get anything done. And getting something done is

better than getting nothing done. At least then there is the prospect of success. So wisdom says be diligent in your labor.

The teaching of Eccl 11:1-6 is this, there is risk in this world. Wisdom says that to be successful you must take risk and to mitigate risk you must diversify your investments. Further, it is not in wisdom's repertoire to try to predict the perfect timing for activity. Wisdom simply says be diligent despite the risks and keep at it. Glenn had this great summary, "Thus in two examples, one from maritime trade (vv. 1–2) and one from farming (vv. 3–4, 6) Solomon urged people toward constant, diligent effort and prudent diversified investment of their energies and resources, recognizing that all is in God's sovereign control."²

In Ecclesiastes 11:7 we come to the climax of Solomon's argument in Ecclesiastes. Essentially what Solomon has argued in the book is that human attempts to find satisfaction in life devoid of God are futile. This is fundamentally because God is the giver of all joy, and he withholds it from those who do not give thanks to Him. Therefore, the way to live life and get enjoyment out of it is to put God at the center of all our activities and give Him thanks. By doing this we can find some good in our labor each day, we can enjoy the fruits of our labor, we can wear nice clothes, put on perfumes and lotions, and enjoy marital bliss for all the fleeting days we have living under the sun. This is as good as it gets in a fallen world. What Solomon does in these final verses is emphasize the importance of putting God at the center of our life early in youth, and not putting it off until later. Ultimately, we are all going to get old and die (barring premature death or the rapture). If we don't put God at the center of our lives when we are still young, we are going to make a lot of mistakes that will haunt us to the very end. The key then, to enjoying life, and finding satisfaction, is remembering our Creator in our youth, otherwise, we will grow old and crusty.

In Eccl 11:7-8 Solomon contrasts light and darkness. In verse 7, **The light is pleasant**, and in verse 8 there are **days of darkness** coming. The Hebrew for **light** and **darkness** is metonymy for "life and death." So, in verse 7, **the light is pleasant** means that "life" is **pleasant**. The Hebrew for **pleasant** is a word used of "honey," which is something sweet that is to be savored. Therefore, life is like honey, something sweet and to be savored. And further, **it is good for the eyes to see the sun**. The word **good** in the Hebrew is "desirable." Therefore, it is "desirable for the eyes to see the sun," meaning it is desirable to be alive. Put together the verse means that life is desirable and it is to be savored like honey. We should make the most of life. God wants us to enjoy life. Life is the gift of God and if you are not enjoying life then you are not living it the way God intended.

Verse 8, **Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come will be futility**. Here Solomon describes how we should rejoice in our lives here because days are coming when we will go to death, and that will last forever. Once dead we can never return here. This is a limited perspective, given that Solomon did not know all that we know regarding the afterlife. During the OT they did not know what happened at death, besides going to Sheol, the grave. So his advice was that **if a man should live** a long life, he should **rejoice in them all**. To help

him **rejoice** he should **remember** that death is coming, and those days **will be many**. The final words **everything that is to come will be futility** refer to the days of death, but are translated incorrectly. The word **futility** is from *hevel*, the word Solomon uses repeatedly as translated vanity. But the word comes from a root meaning “enigma,” or “mystery.” In that sense he often uses it as something “obscure.” All he is saying is that death and the afterlife are “obscure” to him. Solomon and the OT believers did not know what existence after death would be like. It was all obscure to them. Therefore, Solomon’s advice is that you should rejoice in all the days of your life here. Even though we now know much more about the afterlife, and that at death we pass into the immediate presence of God, it is still good advice to enjoy life here and now all the days of our life. As Constable said, “Solomon’s advice to enjoy life is still good since our earthly experience is indeed short, and we will never return this way again.”³ You’re never going to come back here once you leave. You only get one shot. Therefore, you should live life to its fullest. That means rising each day looking to rejoice, finding pleasure, finding joy, finding good in what you accomplish. There is no other way to really live.

In 11:9 Solomon says, **Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.** Youth is the prime of life. The Hebrew **during your childhood** could be “during your youth,” which is probably what is in view. He’s looking at people who are 14-19 years of age. But either way, the point is that when you are young you should **rejoice**. Youth is exciting. You have many impulses and Solomon implores you to **follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes**. This may sound contrary to wisdom, and as if Solomon is condoning sin. But he is not. The last part of the verse brings it into perspective. **Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things.** We can follow our impulses and desires as long as they are within the boundaries of His moral standards. Wallace said, “The point is not that following one’s impulses and desires is inherently bad and will bring condemnation from God. Rather the point seems to be: As you follow your impulses and desires, realize that all you think and do will eventually be evaluated by God. So one must seek joy within the boundaries of God’s moral standards.”⁴ As far as the timing of God’s evaluation, Glenn noted, “there is no reason to believe from either explicit or implicit arguments in this book that Solomon believed this judgment would take place in the afterlife. Instead, like other wisdom writers of his era, he emphasized a temporal judgment within a man’s lifetime...”⁵

In verse 10, Solomon gives more wise counsel to the youth. **So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting.** The command to **remove grief from your heart** means to put emotional stress away. There are many things that can irritate us, frustrate us, vex us and so forth. The youth should remove as many of those things as possible because it’s not possible to enjoy life with all of that. So remove it from **your heart**, which is your “mind.” All that stuff does is cause emotional stress which deprives you of joy. And also, **put away pain from your body. Pain from your body** probably refers to physical pain caused by injury. If you’re wise in your youth you will stay fit and avoid physical injury. So mental and physical health are emphasized in order to enjoy your youth. And the reason set

forth is **because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting**. Again, **childhood** should be translated as “youth,” not little kids. “Youth” and **the prime of life are fleeting**. The word translated **fleeting** is *hevel*, our theme of the book again, which is often translated vanity, but here it is translated correctly as **fleeting**. This period of your life is not going to last long. You may not believe that things could ever change, but they will, so you need to follow your interests, do so vigorously, put away emotional frustrations and don’t physically injure yourself, this is as good as it gets, this is the prime of your life. But do all this knowing that eventually God will judge every thought, deed and motive.

Therefore, in 11:7-10 Solomon is teaching that life is like honey and something to be savored. You only get one life to live, so you should rejoice in it because once you’re gone you can never come back. In youth people should go after the impulses of their heart with the restraint that God is going to evaluate all these things. To do that they must put away things that cause emotional distress and physical injury. Youth is the prime of life and it does not last long. But don’t forget God in all of it.

In conclusion, what can we learn? That wisdom is worth acquiring, and that we should acquire it at an early age. This means asking God for wisdom. It means studying the Scriptures to gain wisdom. It means putting Him first in everything that we do. And when we do this we are able to relax and get the most out of life in a fallen world.

¹ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 11:1.

² Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1003.

³ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ec 11:7.

⁴ Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible* (Biblical Studies Press, 2005).

⁵ Donald R. Glenn, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1004.