



Ecclesiastes

Does Life Have Meaning?

Practice Generosity, Work Hard, and Enjoy Life

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

Chapter 11 contains a number of Proverbs interspersed with the key thought that no one knows the future. Notice these phrases “for you know not” (vs. 2); “as you do not know” (vs. 5); “so you do not know” (vs. 5); and “you do not know” (vs. 6). Since no one knows the future, people should go about their lives with enjoyment; especially in the days of youth. The only caution is to realise that God is the judge so enjoyment and pleasure should come within the context of those things of which God would approve.

The first proverb has been interpreted variously by Bible students. The most popular idea is that a person should do good without any thought of being rewarded, but that reward may one day return from these undertakings. A second similar idea is that good is done and labour pursued with the understanding that in the future God will provide reward. So the casting of bread is a metaphor of labour, generosity, or good deeds done for another without the expectation of an immediate return. These good deeds float away like bread on the waters, but may one day be rediscovered in some pleasant way.

Verse two goes along with verse one and says the same thing in a clearer way. Here bread is given to seven or even eight. The adding of a number plus one indicates an unlimited number.¹ Do good as often and to as many as you can. Don't focus your generosity or efforts on just one or two people, but to many. One day you may need their benevolence. These good deeds are undertaken even in times of stress or the possibility of impending disaster. The wise man does not simply plan for his own future by personal investments, but by generosity to others. One day this generosity will be rewarded either in this life or the life to come.

1. What are some of the ways in which generosity may one day be rewarded?

2. Why is it wise not to be generous to just one or two, but to many?

Verse three shows the future to be outside of man's control. No one can control the rain, the wind, or the falling of a tree in a storm. These events can impact a man's life, but he is powerless to predict or prevent them. Man must continue to live and act even in the midst of an uncertain future.

¹ Smith, James E. *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms*. (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1996), 799.

While a farmer should be prudent in observing the weather, he must still plant and harvest. Verse 4 pictures a man so consumed with concern for the unknown future that he neither sows nor reaps. It is true that unforeseen weather events could destroy the farmer's crops, but not planting and not harvesting assures he will reap no reward.



3. What happens to a man who is immobilised by the fear of what “might” happen?

Hebrew scholars are divided on how verse 5 is to be translated. The key dilemma is how to render the Hebrew word *ruah*. The same word can be translated as wind or as spirit. The ESV translates this verse: “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.”² The NIV translates the verse in this way: “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.” The way in which the NIV renders the verse is the most popular and probably is the preferred translation.

Whichever way verse 5 is translated the key point is the same; man does not know the future nor understand the complexities of the creation of a baby in the womb. Man cannot fully predict which direction the wind will blow or its strength; in fact windspeed and direction are in constant change.

4. What should to a man do about those things that are outside his ability to predict or control?

Verse 6 repeats the thought of verse 4 that one should not be immobilised by thoughts of what might or might not happen in the future. Hard work is encouraged from morning till evening. A man does not know if his early work, or his late work, or both will be fruitful. He does know that no labour will yield no reward.



The unknown nature of the future along with the myriad of problems that a person “might” encounter can cause indecision, inactivity, stress, unproductiveness, and debilitating paralysis. It is possible to do nothing because of the fear of what “might” happen. In the previous chapter, Qoheleth encourages proper planning and precaution (see 10:8-11), but now he teaches that a man must move forward with all his efforts if he is to accomplish anything.

5. How does one find the balance between the prudent planning of 10:8-11 and not becoming paralysed by fear?

² The ESV includes a footnote for the alternate translation.

In verse 7 Solomon begins to conclude his thoughts for Ecclesiastes. Here he basically says that it is good to be alive. After a number of passages in Ecclesiastes that can seem somewhat gloomy, Solomon says that it is good to see the sun. Instead of focusing on the difficulties of life and the fear of what “might” happen a person should enjoy life to the fullest.

The days of darkness in verse 8 are those days that come after death. The brevity of life and its precious nature should motivate a person to rejoice in whatever days he has. The phrase, “*all that comes is vanity*” teaches that life is like a vapour that quickly vanishes. A young man should make the most of every opportunity, and live life to the fullest because the difficulties of old age and the grave are ahead. This should not cause fear or dread, but inspire activity and pleasure while it can be enjoyed.

The young should “rejoice” or be exuberant with their strength and the unknown days ahead. The heart is the seat of the emotion and should be trained to enjoy life. Activities should be undertaken, work enjoyed, pleasures relished, and plans made. Solomon urges young men to be ambitious. The only advice is to realise that God is the judge, so all activities should be ones that would honour God.



To enjoy life, the young man must remove “vexation” from his heart. These are the anxieties of life or discontentment. Next he should put “pain” or “evil” away from his body. The instruction here is to live a moral life. Youth is fleeting and old age will come, so make the most of the opportunity that your strength affords.

Here are some of the key lessons in chapter 11:

1. There are many possible happenings in the future that a man cannot know or predict.
2. A will man will be generous to as many as possible, not expecting an immediate reward, but realising reward will come later in this life and/or in the life to come.
3. The wise man will act prudently, but not allow himself to be consumed with the fear of what “might” happen.
4. A person should enjoy life, especially when young, realising that youth and strength are fleeting.
5. A person should undertake activity and enjoy life avoiding all things which would be displeasing to God because each person will face judgment.