

Ecclesiastes: The Philippians of the Old Testament

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Chapter 11

Sowing in the Morning, Sowing in the Evening

In conclusion, the Preacher **determines to fear God, obey God, and enjoy life**
(9:1–12:14)

Ecclesiastes begins with a declaration that all is futile, enigmatic, or ephemeral (“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity,” 1:2). Solomon focuses on the apparent lack of human advantage in life’s labors “under the sun” (1:3). Indeed, he characterizes life on earth as endless cycle of sunrises and sunsets (1:5). **Now, at the end of the book, he looks “beyond his gloomy vistas to see God.”**¹ Solomon realizes that life’s certainties (like death) and life’s uncertainties (like accidents and disasters) cannot be predicted (cf. Prov 27:1). However, a person can prepare for both sets of circumstances and enjoy God’s marvelous gift of life “under the sun.” How should someone live in the light of Solomon’s extended discourse? Kidner offers a concise, but appropriate summary of this section of the book: **“Be bold! Be joyful! Be godly!”**² Thus, Solomon carries on from the advice of **chapter 10, “Be wise!”** Such instructions or exhortations characterize the last major section of the book (11:1–12:8), proclaiming **a call to decision and obedience.**³

What a Person Does Not Know (vv. 1–6)

Repeatedly Solomon has urged his readers to pursue the opportunities God gives “under the sun.” Now, in **verse 1**, he addresses the matter of **exercising some faith in making an investment that entails risk.** The opportunity involves **either almsgiving** (the traditional view)⁴ **or commercial pursuits involving ocean-going ships.**⁵ Both of

¹ Thomas E. McComiskey, “Ecclesiastes, Book of,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 2 vols., ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 1:654.

² The three referring respectively to 11:1–6; 11:7–10; and 12:1–8. Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn, and a Time to Dance: Ecclesiastes & the Way of the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 96.

³ Michael A. Eaton, *Ecclesiastes: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983), 139.

⁴ Another view that has few adherents interprets the “bread” as a figure for seed that a farmer sows by casting it on soggy or wet ground; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary*,

these involve the use of profits gained from one's labors. If verse 1 deals with almsgiving, then **verse 2** speaks of a distribution of gifts⁶ to seven or even eight needy people, multiplying the odds that some are going to do exceedingly well with that which they have been given. Adherents to this view appeal to an Arab proverb ("Do good, throw your bread on the waters, and one day you will be rewarded")⁷ and Egyptian parallels ("Do a good deed and throw it in the water; when it dries you will find it")⁸ for support. Texts like Proverbs 19:17 ("One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed") lend further support to this approach involving **a principle of ultimate compensation for generosity**. Kaiser, taking the almsgiving viewpoint, rephrases verse 2, "'Be liberal and generous to as many as you can and then some,' . . . So, make as many friends as you can, for you never know when you yourself may need assistance."⁹ In the New Testament a similar truth appears in **Luke 16:9** ("make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings").

If, however, verse 1 refers to **investment by means of commercial shipping**, then verse 2 refers to the diversification of shipments and/or investments into seven or eight consignments, so that at least some ships survive the journeys and return with their holds filled. **"Cast" (v. 1)** actually provides a misleading translation that promotes the traditional viewpoint. However, the imperative more closely approximates **"Send" or "Let loose"**—more befitting a commercial enterprise for which ships are sent out to sea for years at a time before returning to their home port. Additional argumentation for the maritime understanding of these two verses includes the Solomonic history which bears witness to the ships of **Solomon's commercial fleet** (1 Kgs 9:26–28; 10:22). Also, Proverbs 31:14 makes mention of both "ships" and "bread." As for the later Arabic proverb, it "may have been influenced by the early 'charitable' interpretation of verse 1."¹⁰ None of the Egyptian references parallels closely the use of "bread," making them weak attestation to almsgiving in Ecclesiastes.

Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), Ecclesiastes 11:1.

⁵ Donald R. Glenn, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. by John F. Walvoord et al. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1002; Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, New American Commentary 14 (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1993), 338; Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 256; Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 337; Philip Graham Ryken, *Ecclesiastes: Why Everything Matters*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 255.

⁶ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 254–55, associates the word "portion" here with its use in Neh 8:10. NASU's translation ("Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight") is itself misleading, because the Hebrew reads literally, "Give a portion to seven and even to eight." In addition, Deut 18:8 uses "portion" with regard to food.

⁷ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 255–56.

⁸ William P. Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2000), 101, referring to the "Instruction of Anksheshonq". See, also, Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth: A Commentary*, trans. by O. C. Dean, Jr., Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 192.

⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Ecclesiastes: Total Life*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 114 (emphasis his).

¹⁰ Greg W. Parsons, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Ecclesiastes, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160, no. 639 (July 2003): 301.

The “seven, or even to eight” is the same “ $x + (x + 1)$ ” formula found elsewhere in the Old Testament (including Eccl 4:6, 12).¹¹ This form of reference indicates that there are more potential entities that match the description than just the seven or even the eight—in other words, an indefinite number. However, in some situations the formula expresses **the fullness of a condition or, here, an enterprise.**¹²

Solomon does not mean by his words that commercial enterprise or almsgiving are “just a roll of the dice, gamble and nothing more. He is certain that the covenant people can count on eventual success, because God will guarantee it.”¹³ **That which God grants, however, requires both faith¹⁴ and patience.** Jesus’ parable of the talents in **Matthew 25:14–30** appears to illustrate the same truth. The parable condemns the man who fails to invest the one talent that his master had given him. He did not want to take any risks, so he lost all potential gain. In the end, his master took away even the gift he had received. Paralyzed with uncertainty, fear, and doubt, he lost the gift due to its disuse.

The variety of interpretations and translations do not destroy the foundational truths of the text. For example, whether an interpreter settles on the charitable, agricultural, or commercial interpretation of verses 1–2, *the concepts of investment, risk, and faith remain and the exhortation to action rather than paralysis still rises inexorably from the text.* Verse 2 concludes with **“for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.”** Three more times, Solomon highlights human ignorance (twice in v. 5 and once in v. 6). The statement serves as the key to the entire passage. Knowing our ignorance forms the basis for a realistic outlook that depends upon a sovereign, omniscient God.

Continuing the discussion of risk, **verse 3** reveals that no one has control over when the rain falls (even though it will inevitably come) or where a tree might fall (which is entirely random). Whenever an individual waits for perfect conditions before either sowing or reaping (**v. 4**), failure and loss may very well follow. Over-hesitancy in making decisions involving risk can result in the best time passing by during inactivity. **The paralysis of inaction results in lost opportunities.** In the New Testament a similar agricultural metaphor makes its appearance in Paul’s description of the respective tasks of mankind and God in the spread of the gospel: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth” (1 Cor 3:6; cp. Prov 10:22).

Natural phenomena within God’s control remain mysterious to mankind (v. 5). The wind’s path cannot always be charted (cf. John 3:8) and the bones of a fetus can form in unexpected ways inside the womb (cf. Ps 139:13–16).¹⁵ Both are basically invisible and outside the control of mankind (cp. Eccl 8:8).¹⁶ God, as the Maker of all things, produces the wind’s patterns as well as the bones for the unborn infant. **The very fact that He is in control demonstrates that He governs all things and people are not in**

¹¹ See the discussion of 4:7–12.

¹² Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 141.

¹³ Michael Kelley, *The Burden of God: Studies in Wisdom and Civilization from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Minneapolis, MN: Contra Mundum Books, 1993), 138.

¹⁴ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 140.

¹⁵ With a few changes in the Hebrew text, “wind” can be translated as “spirit” or “life-breath,” resulting in the elimination of the figure involving wind and making the illustration just the entrance of the life-breath into the fetus; C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, Anchor Bible 18C (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 336–37. Cp. NRSV: “Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb.”

¹⁶ Compare, also, the phrase “striving after wind” in 1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9.

control. Mankind’s ignorance of the work of God (cp. 8:17) forms an ongoing theme in the final chapters of Ecclesiastes.

Opportunity knocks only at certain times. If the conditions are good enough for sowing seed in the field, the farmer must remain active and pursue his occupation (v. 6). He cannot know whether the sowing should be in the morning or the evening, but the day gives the opportunity. The text expresses the continuous labor that a wise person must expend in order to see the harvest. God alone gives the field’s increase, the enterprise’s profits, or the labor’s success, but **wise people must labor in order to see such results** (cf. 9:10). Tidball summarizes verses 3–5 under three headings: “**Don’t be paralyzed by inevitability**” (v. 3), “**Don’t be paralyzed by speculation**” (v. 4), and “**Don’t be paralyzed by ignorance**” (v. 5).¹⁷ Again, New Testament texts reflect the same instruction via a similar metaphor: “he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6) and “Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary” (Gal 6:9).

Rejoice in the Light (vv. 7–8)

Life presents wonderful opportunities that mankind must enjoy. Being “under the sun” has its limitations, but existence in the light (being able to “**see the sun**”; cf. 6:5; 7:11) is far more pleasant than the alternative (v. 7). Regardless of the number of years God might grant to any individual, “let him rejoice in them all” (v. 8a). **God’s gift of life should be enjoyed, not just endured.** Until this point in the book, other enjoyment passages have “followed enigmatic sections. This shift to having the *carpe diem* section preface and structure the enigmatic section about death is significant, as is the introduction of ‘remember,’ which has not yet occurred in a *carpe diem* passage.”¹⁸

At the same time as one must rejoice, one must also “**remember the days of darkness**” (v. 8b). Since these dark days occupy a large amount of time (“**for they will be many**”), death does not seem an adequate reference—suffering, old age, and dying do fit the description, however. These days consist of times of trouble in which a person finds no delight (cp. 12:1).¹⁹ The trials and travails of a lifetime just serve to make the joys all the more pleasant and sweeter. **Psalm 118:24** reminds the godly of the right daily attitude:

This is the day which the LORD has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Disregard for rejoicing and remembering leads to great disappointment, because everything yet to come will pass very swiftly (v. 8c). “Futility” (*hebel*) in this setting refers to that which is brief and ephemeral. “Everything” must refer to the latter days of life, including the time of dying, rather than to the afterlife.

¹⁷ Derek Tidball, *That’s Just the Way It Is: A Realistic View of Life from the Book of Ecclesiastes* (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 183–84.

¹⁸ Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 343.

¹⁹ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Ecclesiastes: Foundations for Expository Sermons* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 286 footnote 24.

Again, Rejoice (vv. 9–10)

Just as the Apostle Paul repeats the command to rejoice (“**Rejoice**, and again I say, **rejoice**,” Phil 4:4), so King Solomon repeats the identical command (vv. 8, 9).²⁰ However, the second time he addresses the command specifically to the young man. Youth passes quickly, so its opportunities for enjoying life will be few. The reader of Ecclesiastes should note that **Solomon does not instruct young people to rejoice that they are young, but while they are young.**²¹ He tells the young to put in place the theological foundation for living as early as possible.²² When the youth becomes a man, he enters yet another brief season of life. During his manhood, he needs to allow his heart to enjoy life’s pleasantness. **“Like a bubble the days of our ‘youth’ soon burst, so we have to clutch them while we can.”**²³

To many readers, Solomon’s instruction (“follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes”) sounds hedonistic and reckless. Those who interpret the text in this fashion contrast it with **Numbers 15:39**. Numbers speaks of the way that the tassels with a blue cord on the fringes of the Israelites’ garments will remind them to obey the Lord’s commandments rather than their own lusts. Ignoring the context of one or both passages provides the only means by which the two can be confused or made to be contradictory. Due to the very consistent and careful conclusions Solomon reaches throughout the book (and especially in its final chapter), Longman’s characterization of the writer as “a confused, skeptical wise man who vacillates between the traditional doctrine in which he was trained and the harsh realities of life”²⁴ seems unnecessary and overly skeptical itself.

Solomon does not leave this instruction without qualification. In a context where “you do not know” occurs four times (vv. 2, 5, 6), he now says in a positive way, **“Yet know” (v. 9c)**. He reminds the young man that he must keep in mind that God will judge him for all that does not meet divine approval (cp. 9:7). The Hebrew employs a definite article on both “God” and “judgment” (**“the God will bring you into the judgment”**).²⁵ Such grammar might indicate that Solomon has a single, specific judgment in mind.²⁶ In other words, a reality exists beyond this life and that reality includes divine retribution.²⁷ **Hebrews 9:27** proclaims the same basic theological truth: “it is appointed for men to die once and after this *comes* judgment.” Priority, therefore must be given to God and to His will as revealed in His Word. No one should ever make their own desires the priority. Solomon encourages innocent, God-approved enjoyment of life’s gifts. Brown compares Ecclesiastes 11:9 with texts like Proverbs 2:11–14 and concludes that **“the old sage, much like a typical grandparent, provides the necessary**

²⁰ This is the final enjoyment (or, *carpe diem*) passage in Ecclesiastes. As Fredericks notes, “This is a more qualified refrain, however, buffered by the realities of God’s judicial sovereignty and the utter brevity of each stage of life”; Daniel C. Fredericks, “Ecclesiastes,” in *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs*, by Daniel C. Fredericks and Daniel J. Estes, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 16 (Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2010), 236–37.

²¹ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971), 270.

²² Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, 344.

²³ David A. Hubbard, *Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, Preacher’s Commentary Series 16, ed. by Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1991), 237.

²⁴ Longman, *Ecclesiastes*, 261.

²⁵ See the concept of judgment in 3:17; 8:12–13; and 12:14.

²⁶ Eaton, *Ecclesiastes*, 145; Leupold, *Ecclesiastes*, 271; Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 266.

²⁷ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 197, denies any such meaning, opting to identify the judgment with the transitoriness of mankind’s existence.

balance to the harsh admonitions of the parental voice in Proverbs. The combined effect is the formative education of youth.”²⁸

Therefore, people must “**remove grief and anger**” from their hearts and “**put away pain**” from their bodies, because the times of their lives “**are fleeting**” (v. 10). Mankind must never focus on the negatives to the extent that they miss the pleasant opportunities that God gives for their enjoyment. **Enjoying the good things requires the proper perspective on the bad things in life.** After all, the bad is equally ephemeral. “Grief and anger” represents a single Hebrew word occurring seven times in Ecclesiastes. In 1:18 and 2:23 it is parallel to “pain.” In 5:16 the NASU translates the word as “vexation,” in the description of eating in darkness “with great vexation, sickness and anger.” But, in 7:3 Solomon contrasts it with laughter and happiness, making it an equivalent of sadness. Occurring twice in 7:9, “anger” seems most appropriate in that context. As Ryken points out, “**This is not a call to deny the very real suffering that everyone experiences. Nor is it a call to escape pain by living for pleasure. Rather, it is a call to take care of our mental and physical health.**”²⁹

Questions for study:

- What plans do you have to take some risks in order to serve God faithfully and trust Him fully?
- Over what kinds of things in your life do you feel that you have no control?
- What are the perfect conditions for which you wait before making decisions or before doing something for Christ?
- What are the pleasant things you enjoy in life “under the sun”?
- What are some of your memories regarding your “days of darkness”?
- How can young and old alike enjoy life with a balanced perspective and a sense of accountability?
- How can you “remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body”?

²⁸ Brown, *Ecclesiastes*, 106.

²⁹ Ryken, *Ecclesiastes*, 267.