

Ecclesiastes 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Ecclesiastes chapter 11. 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.

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. Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all, but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity. Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.

Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

Ecclesiastes chapter 11 explores what it means to act in a world that is radically unpredictable, where the vaporous character of life renders the outcome of our actions inscrutable.

[1 : 34] It is a chapter that is full of natural imagery. Water, earth, clouds, rain, trees, wind, sowing seed and reaping grain, breath, bones and the womb, light and the sun.

It begins with a verse that has given rise to several different interpretations. Casting one's bread upon the waters could, according to Craig Bartholomew, mean at least one of three things.

Many have taken it to be a reference to acts of charity. This is perhaps the most dominant of traditional Jewish readings. Others have seen the casting of the bread on waters as a reference to diversified trade.

Casting bread on waters is an image of sending out merchandise on ships. The supposed advice is to send out your merchandise on a number of different ships, so that, to shift the metaphor, all your eggs are not in one basket.

A further reading that Bartholomew mentions is senseless action that is undertaken that can have unexpected consequences. Whatever the meaning of the verse, it probably should be read in terms of verse 2, which is paralleled with it.

[2 : 37] The portion given to seven or even to eight may be an image of charity. Alternatively, it may be another way of speaking about diversified investments. Not knowing what might befall any particular ship, it is the wisest course to divide your merchandise between a number of them.

While Bartholomew favours this reading, William Brown finds it unpersuasive. No good merchant merely expects the return of his initial investment. He hopes for some profit upon it.

Referencing similar Arabian and Egyptian proverbs, Brown argues that this is a reference to doing good works, and he also points to Proverbs chapter 19 verse 17 as a parallel.

Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed. Casting one's bread upon the waters is an image of surrendering control. It is an image also of uncalculated charitable action.

There is no knowing where bread cast upon the waters will go. To return to the governing image of the book of Ecclesiastes, This is action willfully undertaken at the mercy of the vapour. The person who casts his bread upon the waters is not trying to resist the vapour.

[3 : 42] He engages in bold, enterprising and seemingly risky action, trusting in the mysterious operations of something else within the vapour. There is some inscrutable moral governance that makes this a wise action.

Daniel Fredericks argues that we should not read this as an either-or principle. There is an image here of boldness and trade, but also of uncalculated charity. In both cases, the actor is instructed to act confidently, and with determination, even in a world of vapour.

The person who exhibits uncalculated charity may end up being the recipient of such charity himself. Natural events will happen when and how they will. They can't necessarily be predicted or foreseen.

How they happen cannot be controlled, and when they happen they cannot be reversed. Many have connected the image of the tree falling to death. Death has a finality to it, and the way that the tree has fallen is the way that it will lie.

Once you have died, the character of your life is out of your control. There is no way to reverse the manner of your end. This may be an implication of the verse, but I don't think it's the primary meaning of it.

[4 : 46] More likely it refers to the way that the natural world operates beyond our sphere of control or prediction. The earliest beginnings of life in the womb, for instance, are mysterious and veiled. They are an analogy to the world as a mysterious realm of possibilities and potential in the hand of God, whose outcome cannot be predicted.

We cannot predict the movement of the Lord's Spirit. Life is uncertain, and we can neither foretell nor control the outcome of our actions. If we are looking for predictable results in this life, we will never act.

Far better to act diligently throughout our endeavours, not having a misplaced confidence in the success of any of our actions, but making ample allowance for risk and uncertainty.

We ought to act boldly in the vapour, putting our actions and our deeds in the hands of God, who directs and disposes all things. Our days are transitory. We should welcome each dawn and recognise the gift that it represents.

The sun and the eyes by which we see it are pleasant and a blessing. We should be mindful of the days of darkness that we will also experience, days that, as we will see in the chapter that follows, particularly are associated with the lengthening shadows of old age.

[5 : 57] Life, both in its sunny days and in its days of darkness, is short, it's transitory, it's vapour. The preacher especially counsels young people to enjoy their youth.

Youth and its pleasures are fleeting, but they are also good and should be enjoyed. While being spiritually circumspect, it is good for young people to follow their hearts and to delight in life.

God will bring all things into judgement, and perhaps one of the things that he will bring into judgement is a person's failure to enjoy life as they ought to. God hasn't given his gifts merely to test us and trip us up, but for us to enjoy.

As we saw in chapter 9, verses 7 to 9, Go eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments be always white, let not oil be lacking on your head.

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.

[6 : 57] Although God will bring all things into judgement, he is not a withholding God, He is a good and generous God, and he wants us to find joy in him and his gifts. Youth in the early days of our life are fleeting, and so we should enjoy these days while we still have them, recognising that they will pass, without being mindless and spiritually unconcerned in our enjoyment.

We should release our hearts from vexation and our bodies from toil when we can, and enjoy God's good rest. A question to consider, what are some actions that we can undertake that are forms of casting our bread upon the waters, which the preacher recommends at the beginning of this chapter?

