



# Ecclesiastes

## (22) You Can be Too Careful

Ecclesiastes 11:1-8

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November 18, 2018

One of the things about getting older is that you learn to see the value of life-experience. When you are younger you tend to value knowledge and effort and making things happen. Those are generalities, of course. But there is some truth to them. I notice, now that I am no longer a young man that experience is quite useful in life and that you get it simply by living and observing life. Most things that happen you have seen before. The way things work in life becomes familiar. The way life works becomes familiar. So is what does not work. And while it does not always do so, experience is supposed to lead to wisdom. What the older folk are supposed to contribute to the conversation of life is wisdom born of experience.

But one of the things that experience teaches you, or at least should teach you is that things often don't turn out as you expect them to. So older people are not always wiser and sometimes younger people are wise beyond their years. One the things that experience shows and that wisdom has observed is that sometimes life does not always follow neat and predicable patterns. Things do not always turn out the way they should. And wisdom has learned from experience to take that into account. One facet of wisdom is dealing with the predictable patterns of life and one facet of wisdom is dealing with the fact that life does not always follow predicable patterns. Wisdom is understanding how life works and wisdom is understanding that sometimes life does not work the way that it should.

The passage that we are going to look at this evening is about how to live wisely in the light of the fact that life is both predicable and unpredictable. It is predicable in the sense that there are ways of living

that are generally successful and there are ways of living that are generally disastrous. If you are a hard worker, generally speaking you will do well and if you are lazy generally you will do less well. If you listen to advice generally you will do better than if you do not listen to advice. That is wisdom. That is the way that God has created the world and human beings to function in the world. Certain ways of living work, generally speaking, and other ways of living do not. Wisdom is living in the light of the way that the world works, and wisdom comes from observing these patterns and living accordingly. However, sometimes things do not work out the way that they should so that those who do everything right sometimes experience things working out wrong. Wisdom does not always lead to success. Sometimes bad things happen to people who do everything right. And wisdom knows that unexpected disaster and failure is always possible.

This passage is about how to live in the light of the fact that life is unpredictable and sometimes you can do everything right and still fail. And the key idea in these verses that you can be too careful. What I mean by that is that you have to take some risks in life even though that means that you might fail. Because life sometimes throws curve balls some people are overly careful, but the result of that is that they miss out on the accomplishments and successes that come from taking risks. God is telling us here that in order to live a life that is pleasing to him you have to take some risks.

Verses 1 and 2 must be understood together. “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.” There are two ways of understanding these verses and some scholars think that the author had both of them in mind. Sometimes literary-types do that sort of thing. They deliberately write things that can be taken two ways because they want us to think and to ponder both possibilities.

So, the first way of understanding these verses is to see them as referring to merchant sea-traders. Israel was trading nation and much of the stuff that was bought and sold was transported by sea and one of the things that was sold was grain. So “Cast your bread upon the

waters” means sent out your grain-filled ships onto the sea. But sending grain-filled ships to sea was risky because they may sink in a storm or they may be stolen by pirates and so verse 2 advises to spread the risk by spreading your cargo over seven or eight ships so that if a ship went down it would not take all of your cargo with it. “Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth.” This is where the risk factor comes in. Casting your bread on the water is risky business because of the possibility of disaster. But these verses are saying, “Take the risk but manage it by spreading the risk over 7 or 8 ships and after many days your ships will come back and you will be rewarded for your efforts.”

The idea here is the same as the kind of advice you get about investing today. Investing is risky business because you can lose all the money you invest and so you are told to diversify. Invest in different kinds of investments and in different parts of the world and in different sectors of the economy so that you have a smaller chance of losing everything and a greater chance of making a modest return. That is the basic idea here in verses 1 and 2 only the author of Ecclesiastes is not only talking about investing, but about life. If you live life without taking any risks you will not have much of life, but you can minimize the risks by not putting all your eggs in one basket – to use a modern bit of proverbial wisdom.

The second way of understanding these verses has to do with giving. In that interpretation, casting your bread on the water is giving to the poor and finding it after many days is the reward that God gives to those who are generous to the poor. Then the meaning is much like Proverbs 19:17 which says, “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed.”

According to this interpretation, verse 2 is an exhortation to give generously to many people or causes because you might face disaster in the future and some of those people may be in a position to help you when you are down. “Give a portion to even, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.”

Either way the idea is to take risk even though there might be a disaster in your future. Casting your bread upon the waters involves some risk.

But do it anyway - only spread the risk around in case of disaster. The gist of these verses is we are to do things in spite of the risk, but we are also to manage the risk by not putting all our eggs in one basket. There is always the possibility of disaster.

And what these verses are counselling against is not taking any risk because you are so afraid that a disaster will come. The wisdom nugget here is that it is possible to be so trapped by fear because of the possibility of things going wrong that you do not engage in life and we should not live like that. Engaging in life involves taking risks and if you are too careful you will miss out on the successes in life.

So, these verses have to do with how to live life in light of the fact that we do not know what the future will bring. It may bring disaster, but we should not disengage from life because of that.

Verse 3 develops the picture of what life is like. It adds to the point that Ecclesiastes is making by saying that some things just happen, and we must just deal with them in life. The point of verse 3 is similar to the point that we make when we say, "It is what it is." Something bad happens and we might shrug our shoulders and say, "It is what it is." Here is verse 3, "If the clouds of 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."

This verse is actually kind of funny. It seems to be saying nothing. You read it and you are inclined to think – duh – what the verse seems saying is more than obvious and not very profound. Rain clouds bring rain and wherever a tree falls there it stays. But, of course, we are meant to ponder it in the light of the context and what it is saying is that things happen in life and you just have to deal with them. If rain clouds come, it is going to rain. Deal with it. And a fallen tree is going to stay where it falls – deal with it. Things happen in life – deal with them.

Verse 4 continues the idea of taking risk in order to live life. "He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap." In those days you did not want to sow your seeds on a windy day because sowing was done by spreading seed by hand and you did not want your seeds to blow away in the wind. And of course, you did not

want to reap your harvest in the pouring rain because you and your harvested crop would get wet and that is uncomfortable for you and wet grain does not keep well. It tends to get moldy. Furthermore, even in those days they had wagons and carts and so just like today if take a wheeled vehicle into a field on a rainy day, you are going to get stuck.

I grew up on a farm, and this is a proverb that my Dad would sometimes quote. The conditions for planning or harvesting were not always perfect, but if you waited for perfect conditions you would never get your seed in the ground or your crops off the fields. So, if you wanted either of those two things to happen, you had to take some risk. Sometimes if it looked like rain, you cut your hay anyway and it rained, and your hay got all wet. Sometimes if looked like rain and you cut your hay anyway, the skies cleared up and you got work done that you would not have done if you were too careful. Ecclesiastes is saying, "Sometimes you have to take risks in life, otherwise you will never do anything worth doing."

Verse 5 adds to the overall theme of these verses by making the observation that we must live with ignorance about many things in life. "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." He refers to one of the great mysteries of life as an example. A sperm and an egg come together in the womb of a woman and nine months later a little human being is born. No matter how many times you see a new born baby it is still an awesome thing. But even though today we have a better understanding of what goes on in the womb of a women with child, we have no idea how the spirit and the body come together.

And so, it is with God's way of working in the world. The author of Ecclesiastes assumes that God is in control of everything that happens in the world, but why things happen as they do is a great mystery. The providence of God is a very mysterious thing. Why is a young father of three children killed in a car accident on his way to work and why was the person driving behind him not in an accident? Why were you born in the west, of Christian parents, and someone else born in India in the lowest cast destined to live a life of poverty and humiliation? The Bible

teaches that God is in control of all things. It also teaches, and our experience confirms that we “do not know the work of God who makes everything.”

This fits with the theme of this passage because it has to do with living with risk. There is a lot of risk in life because there is so much that is unknown. God is in control of everything that happens, but we do not know what he is up to as far as what will happen to us is concerned and this passage is about living in the light of that reality.

Verse 6 makes this point with respect to sowing your seeds. “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.” Plant your crops. Try different approaches. Try planting in the morning. Or in the evening. You do not know whether one is better than the other so try both. But do not refrain from planting your seeds because you do not know whether they will prosper. There may be a drought. They may grow and then get eaten by locusts. Or they may do well. But in spite of all the uncertainties – plant your seeds. Do not be paralyzed by the fact that you do not know what the outcome will be.

So again, he is saying – live life actively. Try things. Do things. You do not know if you will succeed. Bad things may happen. But if you do nothing because bad things may happen, your life will be very small and that is not wise – that is not pleasing to God.

Verse 7, “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for eyes to see the sun.” This verse is saying that it is good to be alive in spite of the fact that life is unpredictable, and disaster may be around the corner. It is wisdom to see the sweetness of life in spite of the fact that it is not all sweetness and light. Just being alive is precious. Life is not without its troubles, but there is a sweetness in just being alive – just seeing light and having the pleasure of seeing the sun. Sometimes we see this principle lived out when we see someone who has little or who has lots of trouble who can still appreciate the simple pleasures of life. Even when we are facing trouble and disaster, there is still much about life that is pleasant and enjoyable.

But this section is about living with the reality of disasters and difficulties and so this section ends on that note. Verse 8, “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.” And here the context suggest that vanity means enigmatic. Life is mysterious. We do not know what the future holds. And there is a lot of pain and trouble in life. We must factor in that reality. So not expect a trouble-free ride, but on the other hand embrace life – live it to the full – take risks, but also take measures to mitigate the risks. And life can still be sweet even though things sometimes go wrong.

Now this may seem like an odd theme to be in the Bible, but there it is and Jesus teaches us the same thing in the parable of the talents. This is the parable in which a rich man goes on a journey and he call his servants and he gives one five talents and another two talents and another one talent. And he goes away. A talent is a huge among of money, about twenty years’ wages for a laborer, according to the footnote in the ESV in Matthew 25. Two of the servants traded their talents and doubled their money. The servant with five talents ended up with ten and the servant with two talents ended up with four. And both of those servants were commended by the master when he returned from his journey.

The servant with one talent was too careful. He was so afraid to lose the money that he did nothing with it. He hid it in the ground so that when the master returned, he could give him back his talent. And the master was not pleased. He had expected all of his servants to do something with the money that he gave them so that he it could get a return on his money. And so, the one-talent guy who buried his talent is called a wicked and slothful servant and his one talent was taken away and he was cast “into outer darkness” where, Jesus says, “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 25:14-30)

Jesus introduced this parable saying that this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. He is teaching us about life in the kingdom of God which is also what the book of Ecclesiastes is teaching us about. Life in the kingdom of God. Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God. That means that Jesus came to establish God’s rule by defeating sin and Satan and

he called men and women to follow him and enter the kingdom of God and this parable is about life in that kingdom.

God expects us to do something with our lives. He expects that by virtue of our creation, but he also expects that by virtue of salvation. Those who belong to the kingdom are the saved who have been delivered from Satan's kingdom and transferred into Jesus kingdom. And part of what God calls us to do as his people is to take some risks with the resources that he has given us with a view to multiplying them. What he is warning us not to do is to be so afraid of failure that we take our talent and hide it in the ground. We are not to be too careful in life.

This does not mean that we are to be reckless. As we saw from Ecclesiastes 11:2, the risk must be managed. We must diversify our portfolio. We are not to throw caution to the wind and take no thought about the possibility of failure, but we are also not to be so careful so that we end up doing nothing and just existing and burying our talent in the ground.

I remind you that we are talking about life in the kingdom. This about living life as a child of God – as a subject of King Jesus. This is about the life of those whose have believed in Jesus and who are following him – whose sins are forgiven, who are right with God and who are seeking to please God because God is their God and they are his people. Jesus here is giving instruction for his disciples – for his followers.

We are saved so that we can invest our lives so that we can make something of them for the glory of God. That is a risky business because we may fail, or disaster may strike, but God does not want us to be so careful that we just exist, live as safely as we can and making nothing of the opportunities and possibilities that God has given to us.

What does this look like? Well it is comprehensive. The wisdom literature of the Bible teaches us that the life of work and money and eating and drinking and family and society all matter to God and that God wants us to live wisely and be successful to his glory. But wisdom is rooted in the fear of the Lord and fearing the Lord involves loving God and our neighbor and doing what Jesus says and seeking to promote the rule of God in our lives and in the world around us and in the church. So,

we are talking about life in general and we are taking about promoting God's kingdom and we are talking about building the church. All of life. Every facet of life.

We are to be all that we can be as human beings and as Christians to the glory of God. We are to develop our gifts. We are to try things. We are to reach higher. We are to pursue holiness. We are to pursue spiritual growth. We are to develop the fruits of the Spirit. We are to be as good as we can be at our work and at our worship and hobbies and at our contribution to the life of the church and the coming of the kingdom.

There is risk involved in living like that. You might fail. You might run into trouble. Let's say that you follow this principle in your giving – you give liberally to support the work of the kingdom. That's risky. Just think of what would happen if you lose your job or if the economy tanked or if you were injured so that you could no longer work. We are to manage the risk, but we are not to live so carefully that we hoard our money because of what might happen.

This principle applies to doing things in the church and kingdom. It involves stretching ourselves to try new things. It involves developing and using our gifts. You might fail. What you attempt may not work. Something may go wrong. This passage in Ecclesiastes and Jesus' parable of the talents are telling us to take some risks – make investments – do not hoard your time and talent – live your life with zest and energy and do not be so timid that your life is just existing without challenges and stretching yourself.

The apostle Paul is a great example of someone who faced lots of obstacles, but who took risks and sought to do all that he could do for the glory of God. In 2 Corinthians 4:8 he wrote, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies."

Paul took risks. He suffered because of those risks. But through it all he manifested the life of Jesus in his body. And that is what this is all about.

Manifesting the life of Jesus. Living out the life of Jesus in our lives so that his power may be displayed in our weakness.

This is wisdom. Wisdom observes that some people are so afraid of failure or disaster that they withdraw from life and do not accomplish what they could. While other people while not being reckless, do take risks. Sometimes they fail. But in the end, their lives are so much more fruitful. And that is how God is calling us to live through the power of Christ living in us.