

“MAKING THE MOST OF THE TIME”

As we near the end of this sermon series on Ecclesiastes with our study of this second-to-last chapter today, we see two themes that the Preacher has developed elsewhere in this book: the unpredictability of life and human mortality. Once again he reminds us that, try as we might, we do not have control over all of the things that take place in our lives. We do not know what is going to happen to us in the future. Life is unpredictable. That being said, the Preacher also reminds us that there is one thing that is completely predictable about life, one thing that is certain for each and every one of us, and this is the fact that our days on this earth will at some point come to an end. We are all going to die. The Preacher has repeatedly told us that we are going to have to face up to these two realities if we want to live a wise and meaningful life in this world of vanity. *And in this passage, his purpose is to show us how to make the most of the time that is given to us in this life in light of life's unpredictability and our mortality.*

The first thing that he tells us is to “Cast your bread upon the waters.” Now the meaning of this phrase is not immediately clear, and there are three main lines of interpretation that have been suggested by commentators. Some have taken this as an imperative to participate in sea trade with other nations, which is something that Solomon did in his days as Israel’s king. Others have taken this as an instruction about the prudence of spreading out your investments and financial resources, something akin to our saying, ‘Don’t put all of your eggs into one basket.’ And others have seen this as a command to be generous and liberal in sharing your resources, especially with the poor.

What are we to make of these three interpretations? Well, I think that each of them could be a legitimate application of the general principle that the Preacher is setting forth here. However, it seems to me that the first two interpretations are a bit less likely to be what the Preacher originally had in mind. The first option makes too much of the Preacher's use of the image of "the waters" in seeing it as a reference to maritime trade. The point that the Preacher is making with this image is a symbolic one, not a literal one. He is conveying a sense of seeming wastefulness. If you throw bread into the water you are never going to see it again. As for the second option, the one that says that this is about spreading out your investments, this seems to lose sight of the larger point that the Preacher is making in the passage. He is not talking about how to make sure you get a good return for your investments, but about how there comes a time when you have to throw caution to the wind in the face of life's uncertainties.

This leaves us with the third interpretation, the one that sees the command to "Cast your bread upon the waters" as a summons to be generous with your resources. This does seem to fit better with the context. Note what it says in verse 2: "Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth." The Preacher is saying that our uncertainty about the future can cause us to become overly cautious, and sometimes even stingy, with our resources. As we know, people tend to scale back their giving during periods of recession, even when they personally have not been affected by the recession. Our worries about the future can cause us to fail to be generous.

One of the greatest barriers to generosity in our culture is the fact that so many people spend everything that they earn, and many even spend more than they earn, living on credit. Now it is true that there are some people who really have to struggle to make ends meet. But in many instances, the reason why people feel like they do not have anything to spare is due to the choices that they have made. Many people in our culture choose the highest standard of living that they can manage based upon their income. And as a result, when it comes to being generous towards others, there is often nothing left. This is not, however, a situation with which a Christian should be comfortable. The Bible makes it very clear to us that God wants his people to be generous. We find one example of this in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where he tells us to engage in honest work in order that we might have something to share with those who are in need. Generosity is an important Christian virtue. Have you made room for this virtue in your budget? Do you reserve time for this virtue in your schedule?

While verse 1 does seem to be speaking about being generous with our resources, I think it is also speaking in a more general sense about the fact that the life of a believer should be characterized by confident boldness, and this in spite of the fact that there are so many things in life that lie beyond our control. This is the point of verse 3. The weather follows its own laws and times. The trees do not consult with us before they fall. There are many things that happen in life that are not convenient for us. We cannot do anything about such things. And while it is wise to do what we can to prepare for the unexpected, it is possible for us to respond to all of the 'What ifs' of life by becoming

overly cautious. We should not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by our uncertainty about the future. This is the point that the Preacher is making in verse 4, where he says, “He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.” We can be easily discouraged by the uncertainties that lie ahead of us, and this can cause us to be unproductive. It requires effort on our part to resist this temptation. As Charles Bridge writes,

“It is a great work of self-possession to rise above present discouragement – not to magnify every trifling difficulty, or to start objections against present duty.” [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 271]

If you allowed everything that could discourage you to weigh you down, you would be in a perpetual state of despair. If you tried to make all of your decisions by taking into account every single thing that could go wrong, you would never make any decisions at all. If you always waited for the perfect moment before starting something, you would never do anything. While it is important to be wise in our decisions, we do not want to fall into the opposite error of waiting for the ideal conditions before getting started. The ideal conditions will never come. There is something to be said for being cautious, but there is also something to be said for being bold. One area in which this is so true is with regard to having children. There is never a perfect time to add a baby to your household. There are a lot of things about having children that could be seen as “inconvenient.”

Being a good parent requires a great deal of time, attention, and self-sacrifice. If we wait for the ideal conditions before we start having children, we will never have them.

In verses 1-4, the Preacher tells us that we should respond to life's uncertainties by living with confident boldness, and especially by being bold in our generosity. The next thing that he has to say about how to respond to life's uncertainties is that we need to remember that we should not expect to understand everything about the way the Lord exercises his providential control over his world. This is the point of verse 5. We cannot even understand the mystery of how life begins. Why should we be surprised, then, that we cannot understand the mysteries of providence? It does not always seem to us that God is really doing anything to accomplish his purposes. But the Scriptures assure us that he is always about his work. He is bringing about everything that he has ordained for this world. He is perfectly accomplishing his great plan of redemption. Even though we cannot always understand the workings of providence, we can believe what the Bible tells us about it. And we need to believe it, because it is only by trusting that the Lord is providentially guiding everything that takes place in our lives that we can find peace, comfort, and hope amidst all of the uncertainties of life.

The next thing that the Preacher has to say about dealing with life's uncertainties is that we should make the most of life at every stage of our lives. This is the meaning of the instructions about sowing in the morning and in the evening in verse 6. In the verses that follow, the Preacher uses light and darkness as symbols for life and death. In a similar way, he seems to be using morning and evening to represent our earlier years and

our later years – the morning and evening of life, if you will. He is telling us to make the most of our lives from beginning to end. Sometimes people squander their younger years by falling prey to the allure of worldly pleasures and pursuits. And at other times, people who started off well in life allow themselves to fizzle out in their later years. Neither option is what the Lord wants for his people. God wants us to use our whole life well. He wants us to be productive and fruitful from beginning to end. You young people, do not think that you can wait until you are older to start glorifying God in all that you do. Do it now. Make the most of your youth. Honor the Lord by serving him with the best years of your life. And those of you who are older, do not give in to the temptation to stop running your race before you reach the finish line. Run to the very end. Finish well. Make the most of however many years you have left to glorify God with your life.

In verses 7-8, the Preacher begins to address his other concern: how we should respond to the fact of our mortality. And the first thing that he says about this is something that he has said before. He reminds us that life is better than death. Now this might seem self-evident, but the Preacher knows that there are times in our lives when we need to be reminded of it. “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.” Despite all of its frustrations, despite its uncertainties, despite the fact that it does not last, life is still a wonderful gift from God. And God wants us to treat it as such. Rejoice in all the years that God has given you to live in the world that he has made.

Notice, however, that the Preacher balances this with a sober reminder that the days of darkness will eventually come. As he has told us again and again, this life will not

last. And the reason why he keeps reminding us of this is because life can only be properly enjoyed when we are mindful of the fact that it will not last forever. Otherwise, we will expect too much out of life, and it will inevitably disappoint us. As Derek Kidner writes, “by themselves, time and all things temporal will disappoint us, who have eternity in our hearts.” [Kidner, 98] Do not make the mistake of thinking that the good times will never end. They will.

In verse 9, the Preacher offers another word of counsel regarding how to make the most of life in light of our mortality. He tells us to rejoice in our youth. Enjoy the years when you are full of health and vigor. Make the most of them. Do not waste them. Do something worthwhile. Delight in the good things that life has to offer.

However, this is not all that the Preacher has to say on this matter. By all means, enjoy life, but make sure that you enjoy it in the right way. Do not make an idol out of the things of this world. Do not look to it for ultimate comfort and satisfaction. It will never be able to deliver. And always remember that the Lord will hold you accountable for how you use the things of this life. This is what the Preacher means when he says “know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.”

The Preacher’s last word of counsel in this passage comes in verse 10, where he gives us two pieces of advice that are held in tension with one another. On the one hand, we should not dwell too much upon the sadnesses, hardships, and disappointments that we experience in this life. Do not allow these things to so dominate your thinking that you are unable to appreciate life as a gift. “Remove vexation from your heart.”

On the other hand, the Preacher counsels us to remember that youth, the time when life seems so full of promise and possibility, is fleeting. The young often see death as something so distant that it is not even worth taking into account. But the wise person never loses sight of the fact that this life will not last. In fact, the key to living your life well is to always remember that this life is a preparation for eternity. As Thomas Boston writes, “Had we a clearer view of the other world, we should not make so much of either the smiles or frowns of this.” [*The Crook in the Lot*, 109-10]

Life is a gift of God’s grace, and it is a gift that is to be well spent. And this is especially true for those of us who share in Jesus Christ’s victory over death. Even though everything under the sun is vanity, God has promised us that our work in the Lord is not in vain. Take advantage, then, of every opportunity that you have to do good with your life. Reflect upon these questions from commentator Charles Bridges:

“[W]hat blessing am I bringing to my fellow-creatures - in the family - in the Church - in the world?... Are those around me enriched by my gifts and graces? Are they benefited by my prayers and good service? The power to do good flows from the willingness to do it.” [*Ecclesiastes*, Geneva Commentaries, 269]

It might sound like a cliché, but it really is true that the Lord only gives you one life to live. The time that you are given in this life is your one opportunity to cast your bread upon the waters. Use it well. Don’t be paralyzed by all of life’s ‘What ifs.’ Be bold in

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living for Christ. We do not know exactly what the future holds for us, but we know the One who holds the future in his hands. And as Christ himself promised, if you lose your life for his sake and for the sake of his gospel, you will surely save it. Spend your life in generous, bold, and joyful service to the One of whom the psalmist declared, “My times are in your hand.” [Ps. 31:15]