

Living in an Unpredictable World

(Ecclesiastes 11 & 12)

The only thing certain about the future is that it is unpredictable. We don't know what is going to happen next week, next month, or next year. However, God (the Creator of all things, including time), does know all about the future and has given us principles to follow. Through Solomon, He tells us how to live in this unpredictable world.

First, invest carefully (11:1–6)

Solomon, the richest and wisest person in the world, now gives us some investment advice. He writes: *Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days* (11:1). Some see this as an exhortation about the rewards of being generous. However, this idea is not consistent with the context because Solomon is not talking about rewards but about investments in this passage. What does 1 Kings 9:26a tell us about King Solomon's investment strategy?

Solomon's wise investment made a lot of money from international trade (1 Kings 10:11, 15, & 22). In his day, like today, one of the main trade commodities was grain. The merchants of Solomon's day loaded their grain onto ships and sent them off. Did you notice that in the phrase *cast your bread upon the waters*, the word waters is plural? The idea is to not put all your grain on one ship because shipping involves many risks, such as shipwrecks, pirates, dishonest ship captains, etc.

Next, Solomon advises to *give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth* (11:2). In other words, diversify your investment portfolio. This is like the old saying, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." Because life is uncertain, be smart and don't have all your money in one type of investment.

Using the context of sowing and reaping, Solomon reminds us the weather is beyond our control (11:3). Then, what advice does he give in verse 4?

We can sometimes let uncertainty paralyze us. There is an old saying, "To over analyze is to paralyze." We shouldn't be careless or ignore the risks, but we shouldn't let the uncertainties of life paralyze us. If we wait for ideal circumstances to invest our money, we will not *reap* a return.

We can't accurately predict the *wind*, or weather, during a harvest season, nor can we know how God puts the breath of life into a baby in the womb. These are examples of many things we don't understand about the *work of God* (11:5). Therefore, Solomon's advice is to *sow your seed* in the morning but keep busy all afternoon at some other profitable enterprise. You don't know which investment, possibly even both, will *prosper* and bring a profit (11:6).

We may have to try many things in life because we don't know which one God is going to bless. Too often we want God to give us some "insider trading information," but God will not do that. We must in faith follow the principles about money found in God's Word. One very important principle is found in Proverbs 28:20b. What is it?

If you go for the "get rich quick" schemes, you end up a loser. The way to succeed financially is to remember *whoever gathers little by little will increase it* (Prov. 13:11). The gradual, persistent making and investing of money is the way to gain wealth. Stick with what has been proven to work. In an uncertain world, invest carefully and ...

Second, live joyfully (11:7–12:8)

When are you going to start enjoying life? Some might say, "When I have so much money," "when I live in a certain kind of house," or "when I have a certain job," etc. However, if you don't know how to enjoy life now, you never will. Solomon tells us we can live joyfully in spite of the uncertainties, if we remember *it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun*, or the dawning of a new day (11:7). *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, or meaningless* (11:8). In other words, don't let the uncertainty of coming problems and adversity steal your joy. Because God is the Maker of all things, what does Psalm 118:24 tell us we should say the first thing every morning?

We should *rejoice in our youth*, enjoying every day of it. But remember, *God will bring everything we do into judgment* (Ecc. 11:9). To enjoy life, start young because old habits are hard to break. Solomon is not advising us to party and indulge in sinful desires. He is saying we should do things we enjoy. If we have kids, we should do things we can enjoy with them.

To live joyfully, *remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity* (11:10). The word translated *vexation*, or "sorrow," (KAAS, kah'-as) means anxiety or worry. You can't live joyfully if you constantly worry. That's why you must *banish vexation from your heart*. To live joyfully, don't be a "worry wart"!

The phrase *put away pain from your body* means to get rid of things that are bad for your body. It may be the way you eat, or it might be drugs, alcohol, tobacco, or immorality. If you don't take care of your body when you are young, you will pay for it when you are old. Also, it is a sin to do anything that harms your body. Why, according to 1 Corinthians 6:19?

To live joyfully, Solomon next writes: *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"* (12:1). We should live joyfully, but responsibly, in our youth, before the evil days when our physical abilities deteriorate with old age. How does Solomon describe aging in verse 2?

Aging affects our minds. The phrase *the clouds return after the rain* may refer to our mental processes when our minds become cloudy. Did you hear about the man who went to his doctor and said, "Doc, I have a big problem; I can't remember anything anymore." The doctor asked, "How long have you had this problem?" The man paused for a moment and said, "What problem?"

In verses 3–5, Solomon describes getting old. *The keepers of the house*, probably referring to our arms and hands, begin to tremble (12:3a). As we get old, we tend to be *bent* or slumped (12:3b). *The grinders cease because they are few* refers to teeth, which often become fewer as we get older (12:3c). Also, as we age, our *eyes are dimmed* and we need bifocals, or even trifocals (12:3d). *The doors on the street being shut and the sound of the grinding is low* means we begin to lose our hearing (12:4a–b). Have you noticed that older people often *rise up at the sound of a bird*, early in the morning, wishing they could sleep longer (12:4c)? *The daughters of song being brought low* may refer to the weakening of our voices.

In verse five, Solomon tells us, as we age, *we become more afraid also of what is high* because, if we fall and get hurt, we don't bounce back like we did when we were younger. Because of our poor vision, as we age, we also develop more *terrors, or "fears,"* about traveling alone on the road, such as flat tires, rain storms, etc. As we grow older, our hair will turn white *like almond tree blossoms* (if we have any hair left). Age also causes us to be like a dying *grasshopper* at the end of summer that *drags itself along*, or is with "burden." The phrase *desire fails* is literally translated "the caperberry will be ineffective." In Hebrew, "caperberry" means "provocative of desire." It is native to the Mediterranean region and was taken as a stimulant for the senses. Losing its effect refers to the loss of vitality, taste, and appetite.

As verse five ends, Solomon reminds us we will eventually go to our *eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets* (will come to our funerals). There are only two eternal homes. How does Jesus describe them in Matthew 25:46?

Solomon urges us to remember the Lord *before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern* (12:6). The words snapped, broken, and shattered refer to becoming worn out. That's what happens when we get old. We call it "over the hill." However, Art Linkletter reminded us, "It's better to be over the hill than under it." When we are far enough "over the hill," we die. How does verse 7 describe death?

Because we are going to return to *dust* (Gen. 3:19c), Solomon concludes life is *vanity*, or meaningless, without wisdom from God (12:8). In an unpredictable world, invest carefully, live joyfully, and ...

Third, face judgment confidently (12:9–14)

Solomon concludes this book by telling us about its author. It was written by a wise Preacher, or teacher, who studied and with *great care* classified his studies into *many proverbs* to impart *knowledge* to the people. He sought just the right words to express the *words of truth* accurately (12:9–10). Solomon also wrote the book of Proverbs. A proverb is a short saying expressing truths that apply to life.

The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd (12:11). *Goads* were sharp, pointed sticks used to prod oxen to keep them moving in the right direction. *Nails firmly fixed*, or “fastened,” refers to a nail-studded stick with which a shepherd drove sheep. Likewise, the God-given writings of Solomon contained in the Bible are to keep us moving in a godly direction. Solomon says they are *given by one Shepherd*, which means the Shepherd of Israel, God Himself. God gave us the Bible to be a goad, or prod, in our lives. How does 2 Timothy 3:16 express this fact?

Solomon warns us to *beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh* (12:12). This means there are endless opinions and books about how we should live. However, true wisdom can only be found in the Word of God. Solomon isn’t telling us not to appreciate other books. We should learn all we can from other books (Prov. 18:15), but we must remember, when it comes to morality and holiness, the Bible is the only authority.

The book of Ecclesiastes cannot be understood without reading the last two verses, which Solomon calls *the end*, or “conclusion,” of the matter. *We should enjoy life but not forget to fear, or revere, God and keep his commandments because this is the whole duty of man* (12:13). According to verse 14, why is this critically important in an unpredictable world?

Although there is much in life we don’t understand, we do know enough to be held responsible at the Judgment for what we do or fail to do. However, if we live by God’s Word, which teaches us to abide in Christ, when He appears *we can have confidence and not be ashamed* (1 Jn 2:28).

To live a meaningful life in this unpredictable world, invest carefully, live joyfully, and face judgment confidently.