

# 10

## *Ecclesiastes 11: 1, 2*

### *Live and Work under the Sun*

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Text: Ecclesiastes 11: 1- 2.

Reading: Ecclesiastes 11: 1-6.

Singing:

Psalm 103: 1, 2.

Psalm 103: 4.

Psalm 127: 1, 2, 3.

Psalm 128: 1.

Hymn 59: 1, 2, 3.

### **Theme and points:**

*We are called to live and work under the sun with a view to God's blessing.*

We will note:

- 1) the promise of this blessing*
- 2) the prudence with this blessing*

# *Ecclesiastes 11: 1, 2*

## *Live and Work under the Sun*

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*Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.*

The Preacher has now looked at life under the sun from various angles and has maintained his conclusion that, at bottom, it is all meaningless, useless, and vain. In fact, life is tiresome and it really gets you nowhere. Yes, if you can enjoy life, your marriage, and work, that is a bonus, but even that is useless toil. And after a hard life, all ends in death. This is the common destiny of all the living. We can try to keep our heads above the water, but we are sinking all the time, soon to go under.

### **Focus on youth**

In the last two chapters, the Preacher focuses on the *youth*. There must be a reason for that. Indeed, there is. Older people will more readily accept the evaluation of life as being vanity, but for younger people it is a bit of a downer. After all, they stand at the beginning of their lives, with many dreams and aspirations, and they have not yet become saddened and sceptical about life. Youth are not always realistic.

The youth should be *encouraged*, not disillusioned. The last thing that young people need is a negative outlook on life. Don't develop a life without the LORD! Hence the famous passage in chapter 12: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth." We will focus on that in the next section, but I mention it now already.

In our current text we have the equally well-known passage about casting bread on the water. We look at it within the larger framework of this Bible book. And the message is then simply this: live and work *in faith*. Do not give up on life, because you may not give up on God. We may not understand the work of God (11: 5), and we do not know ahead of time if a venture will have success or not, but that is not a reason to stop living and working. Life may be risky, but it is not absurd.

The text here is not directed as yet only to the youth. It holds true for everyone, young and old: cast your bread upon the waters. This means:

*We are called to live and work under the sun with a view to God's blessing.* We will note

- 1) *the promise of this blessing*
- 2) *the prudence with this blessing.*

When you look at the whole section (11: 1-6), the general line is clear: do your work. Do not worry too much about external circumstances or about uncertain factors, but just do what your hand finds to do, that is, what lies before you. We should not become lazy, but remain diligent. See 11: 6: sow your seed in the morning and at evening let not your hands be idle.” That is not a Calvinistic work ethic, but a divine calling. Work, and work hard. As stated, the wisdom literature has no appreciation for the sloth or the sluggard.

Do your work, then, but do it with an eye to the Lord. Trust in him and believe his promise. What is this promise of God? It is formulated rather cryptically (or shall I say poetically) in 11:1, our text: “Cast your bread upon the waters.” The explainers have really struggled with this particular passage.

### ***Cast bread on the water?***

What does it mean to “cast your bread upon the waters”? Some have connected this to shipping. You should invest in a shipping company and conduct overseas trading. The idea would be then that running a shipping company is risky, but can also be lucrative. Dare to take risks. But I think that this is going too far afield, for the text (or the book, for that matter) does not speak about shipping at all.

I think that we should take it as simply as possible: casting your bread upon the waters is a foolish kind of undertaking in the sense that you are just throwing it away. A least, that's how it looks.

I used to have a fish pond in my back yard, and I once actually experimented a little in this regard: cast some slices of bread on the water, and do you know what happened? The fish began to attack them immediately, and what floated for a while soon became soggy and started to sink. After one day, there was not a piece left to be seen. It was all gone.

### ***Foolish advice from the Lord?***

Is this advice from the Lord foolish? Are we told to take risks here? Would it be wise to live on the edge? I read somewhere that our Lord Jesus

Christ always lived “on the edge”, undertook risks, dared to do what was foolish in people’s eyes, and because of this was mistrusted and condemned. But that is nonsense, of course, for our Lord did not live on the edge, but in the *midst* of his people.

While the command to cast our bread on the waters may seem foolish, there is a promise here: “...for after many days you will find it again.” It does not say that you *might* find it again, but that you *will*. That is a promise you can count on. What *looks* perhaps foolish and risky to some is in fact not a risk at all because of the promise of God.

### ***The LORD does not tell us to take risks***

The LORD does not tell us to take risks. In fact, I think the opposite is true. To take risks would be unwise and foolish. Remember this is the wisdom literature. The sense is this: we may have to do what looks foolish to some, but which will in due time reap great benefits. We undertake a project, and many may say that it is foolish and a waste of money and effort, but the LORD promises to bless. All our efforts are undertaken in this faith.

How can you work without faith? Who in his right mind would throw bread on the water? Whatever project it is, it must be undertaken with a view to God’s promise that He will bless his children. He always has blessed and He always will bless.

### ***Immediate results?***

There may not be *immediate* results. The text says: after many days you will find it again. “After many days”, see that? Patience is required. Trust is needed. We should never work only for the moment, for the short-term, but have a much broader and wider vision. We must realize that it takes time and effort to get results, and on that path *much patience* is needed. Patience is not so much that you are willing to wait, but that you will bear the load. I will do my part, as others do their part, and then together we can do it under God’s blessing.

Here we see again the contours of the Gospel in this book. Every work our Lord Jesus did was done in faith. He did not say, “Well, it’s all meaningless, and I’ll die on a cross, no one will accept me, so who cares”, but He said, “I have come to do the work of my Father!” Our Lord took not one risk, and He led a careful life, never jeopardizing himself or his disciples. He worked in faith that his work was not in vain, but that it would be richly blessed.

## **God promises results**

The Lord worked in faith because God promises results. “You will find it again.” It is in this faith that we must tackle our work, our lives, our relationships, and also our church life. When we serve God, nothing is thrown away. We do not take risks, but we roll on in faith. American President Bush may have said a year after September 11, 2002, “America is open for business,” but we ought to say, “The church is open for business, the business of the Kingdom, and the work of God. Let’s roll!”

We are not told to take unnecessary risks. Did the council at Hamilton, after hearing the congregation, decide to take a risk when agreeing on a plan for renovation of the existing church facilities? Did we, deciding to go to the northeast of Brazil for mission work, decide to take a risk? And what about other projects, like evangelism ministries? Are all these things risky business? Are we merely spinning our wheels and throwing away money? What we are doing, in fact, is working in faith. We work in faith that the Lord will bless. He has blessed until now. This is the only way to deal with the vanity and meaninglessness of life: find meaning in the work of God, and work in faith that He will bless.

## **Let’s not become cynical**

How else would you want to tackle life? Shall we become cynical, and say, “Oh well, it’s all useless, but it must be done”? Shall we become fanatical, and say, “No matter what the cost or risk, we’re going to do it”? Neither bland cynicism nor bold fanaticism are the answer to life’s challenges. The answer is: work in faith with a view to God’s promises that He will bless and give meaning to life.

Only in this light can we understand the sense of the next verse: the *prudence* that is required with respect to this blessing. We should not say, “Well, the Lord will bless, so go ahead, take risks.” The second verse is also rather hard to understand. “Give portions to six, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” What does that mean? How does that fit in?

## **Be prudent**

Remember, the Preacher was talking about bread. So the “portions” mentioned here must refer back to the bread mentioned in 11: 1. “Cast your bread upon the waters”, that is, work in faith with a view to God’s promise, but also be *prudent*. Giving portions to seven, yes, to eight means dividing things in a proper and a wise manner.

Some explainers see here an exhortation to give alms liberally, so that should you become poor yourself (by the disaster mentioned later), many will return the favor of generosity. Then it would be something like our Lord said later in the parable of the shrewd manager: “I tell you use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings”(Luke 16: 9). But I do not think this to be the proper direction to go, for almsgiving is not mentioned anywhere here.

### ***Do not put all your eggs in one basket***

The idea of dividing and giving portions to seven or eight is simply a matter of prudence. In other words, to use a dynamic equivalent expression, do not put all your eggs into one basket. That is unwise or imprudent. You may cast your bread upon the waters, but be sure to take careful measures; give portions to others, so that not all is lost.

Proper courage in faith should not become uninhibited boldness. We must act in faith, but not rashly. There is always a measure of prudence required. God’s promises are to be accepted but should not be abused. Our Lord said something similar: you should not build a tower if you have not counted the cost. Don’t go to war, before assessing the enemy’s strength (Luke 14: 28-33).

That text should not be used to kill proper initiatives, but it does mean that we must be prudent with God’s promises. Proper stewardship is always required. Do not take unnecessary risks which are not even required. There must be a sense of responsibility on the part of the believers.

### ***We are not in control***

“For you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” We do not control external factors. Who can determine when the rain will fall (11: 3)? Lightning may hit a tree, and where it falls, it stays! We must be very prudent, careful, *for we do not control the situation*. I think this is an important line in the whole book of Ecclesiastes. We are not in control. The LORD alone can give the blessing. And we must live wisely, prudently, doing our work in faith, but never in rashness.

We are not in control. The LORD is sovereign King. This is the bottom line in the whole book that again comes to the fore here: the sovereignty of God. Work in faith, but also with wisdom. Understand that human planning is nothing more than planning, and that the blessing must come from above. Do not be reckless and foolish.

There are those who do not put enough trust in the promises of God. They always say that something cannot be done. Get a grip, get with the

program. There are those who rashly presume upon the promises of God thinking that something can easily be done, no sweat. No sweat? Nothing under the sun is without blood, sweat, and tears, and don't you forget it. We will have to share the load together. Share the wealth, share the responsibility. Believe and be wise. It is in this way that we are directed to work with the promises of God as we toil under the sun.

### ***The life the Lord lived***

It is the life the Lord Jesus lived. Let me end with that. He cast his bread upon the waters. He acted in simple faith. Even when He went to his cross. He said, "It can be done, I will do it!" And He did it. But not once did He act rashly. Not once did He lose his humility, his total dependence upon the Father. He gave portions to others and shared the wealth. He shouldered his responsibilities, but also called others to God's service. Now He calls us, to work in faith, boldly and wisely.

Let us be like Him in this life under the sun, and blest by His great favour, we will have what we may need.

AMEN.