

## WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

Ecclesiastes 11:1-12:1, 11-14

When all is said and done, we usually find that more is said than done. In our quest to find meaning in life, we need to be careful to not spend so much time looking for the answers that we miss out on actually living our lives. So many times, we find ourselves thinking that having “faith” is totally contained in our belief system and what we know. As a consequence, we spend a lot of time reading the Bible, listening to sermons, getting involved in religious or philosophical discussions and sometimes praying, singing songs and other things that are linked to various ideas of worshiping God. All these are “good” things in which we should be involved; however, these are the initial steps that can direct us onto the best path of life as we move from the starting point to the final destination. They are also useful to help us correct any deviations from the right path as we make progress toward our destination.

Jesus warned His disciples about just hearing and not doing. We sometimes talk about “faith in action” and fail to realize that faith without action is a “lifeless faith” that has no power. The other side of that coin is that actions without faith are just “dead works” that produce little or no benefits and lead to the sense of futility and vanity that Solomon bemoaned as what many see as the outcome of man’s existence on earth.

Just as the writer to the Hebrews urged his readers to get beyond the basics and go on to maturity (Heb. 6:1-3), we need to apply what we have learned in life even though there may be risks involved and take the next steps beyond just learning. God has provided each one of us with resources and these need to be invested (rather than just buried), we need to look for and take advantage of the opportunities that God sends our way and do these things in light of what is pleasing and honoring to God.

### Invest in Life – 11:1-6

<sup>1</sup>Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. <sup>2</sup>Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. <sup>3</sup>If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth; and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. <sup>4</sup>He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap. <sup>5</sup>Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones *are formed* in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. <sup>6</sup>Sow your seed in the morning and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good. Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 (NASB95)

The imagery of casting bread upon the surface of a body of water was one that I had formed when I was quite young and had heard a pastor present a message on the importance of being charitable and helpful toward others. I had wondered at the time what someone could do with a soggy slice of bread? It turns out that what I had imagined was not even close to what Solomon had in mind. He was presenting an image of loading up ships with grain that was to be sold to people in different parts of the world. The idea of “you will find it” is better rendered “it will reach its destination” after many days.

This set of verses addresses issues of uncertainty and the need to take action in spite of the uncertainty if we are going to actually accomplish anything. Putting anything aboard a ship that was going to sail hundreds of miles away involved significant risks because of the uncertainty of storms or shipwreck caused by any number of reasons or even the possibility that pirates that might steal the cargo. Carrying out business or commerce required an act of faith. Such practices should not be thought of as “a blind leap of faith” but a reasoned assessment of the dangers and the rewards along with the necessary precautions to minimize the risks. What

could a merchant do to minimize the risk of having a great loss in case something did happen to a ship carrying grain that he was selling? The answer is found in verse two: Divide the cargo into seven or eight different ships to minimize the risk of a devastating loss. We have a saying that is used today that expresses this same wise practice. We say, don't put all your eggs in one basket. Why? Because we do not know what or when things might come our way and these things make for uncertainty.

There are some things we do know. For example, we know that the wind is going to blow and sometimes that causes a lot of damage such as trees falling over or other things. We know that it is going to rain (sometime) and rain can be good or bad depending on when it comes. If it is going to rain, then that will interfere with harvesting the crops. Such uncertainty can produce inaction if we concentration just on the risk. Not knowing when a wind storm is going to arise could prevent a farmer from sowing seed and not knowing when it is going to rain could result in the hay never being cut or the wheat not being harvested.

Is it better to plant your crops in the morning or the evening? What about planting by the phases of the moon? Which is better? Does it really matter? The answer to such questions is "we don't really know." There could be a multitude of other circumstances that may arise that would have more influence than the time of day or the time of the month. Solomon's advice was to do what you can, when you can, and trust the outcome to the Lord. This is another example of doing what you can to minimize the risk by diversification of how you invest.

Let's go back to the idea of "casting our bread upon the water" being applicable to *giving assistance and help to others so that we can anticipate help in our time of need*. We may not be involved in commerce or we may not be farming, however, all of us are in the business of living. Life itself is full of risks and we should be able to learn from Solomon's advice as to ways to lessen the effects of uncertainty. What can we do to minimize risks in our lives? What do most people normally do to minimize financial risk from such things as auto accidents, house fires, illness, and disability? The obvious answer is that we buy an insurance policy and pay premiums so that the losses we might incur will be lessened in case something happens. You may be familiar with some of the practices of those who are Amish. They say they do not buy insurance since their community of believers provides all the help they need. They help each other to recover from losses and the only thing that makes it work is an understood responsibility that they have for each other. They don't pay premiums but they do expend resources at the time of need. When you think about, commercial insurance works the same way except you prepay and someone else manages the dispersing of assistance and does so for a fee. I have heard some argue that, if we really are trusting God, then we shouldn't purchase insurance. Would these same folks argue that if we are trusting God, that it is OK to put all our eggs into one basket?

On an individual practical basis, one way that we can "cast our bread upon the waters" is to take the initiative to help our neighbors, friends, family, and those in our church fellowship. We can do that simply because there is a need and we can help without any expectation of being "paid back." If the help returns to us in time of need, that would be great, but that should not be the motivation for helping each other.

### Live Life in Light of Eternity – 11:7-8

<sup>7</sup>The light is pleasant, and *it is* good for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8</sup>Indeed, if a man should live many years, let him rejoice in them all, and let him remember the days of darkness, for they will be many. Everything that is to come *will be* futility. Ecclesiastes 11:7-8 (NASB95)

If we take the words of these verses literally, then we could say that Solomon had observed what is apparently being rediscovered in today's modern holistic health movement that

natural sunlight (or even the use of a sun lamp) can be useful in combating depression. Some people, especially those who live in more northern regions talk about the oppressive feeling they have because of “gray days” when they don’t have bright sunshine for extended periods of time. In a more spiritual or emotional sense, we can have times of elation or when we are “up” emotionally and there are times when we may struggle to be optimistic. Solomon’s advice was to make sure that we enjoy the good times and learn from the down times.

Some commentators think that Solomon was using light as a metaphor for life and darkness as a metaphor for death. If this was Solomon’s intent, then these verses are confirmations of what we saw earlier that people can have hope if there is life. But while we are in the process of enjoying life and the work God has given us to do, we need to keep in mind (remember) that death and whatever is beyond death (days of darkness) are waiting for us. The phrase “days of darkness” is probably a reference to the fact that we simply do not know what we will encounter in eternity (we haven’t been given enough light to see that far) as opposed to thinking that it is all gloom and doom. This idea is seen in the final sentence of verse eight which can be translated as “everything that is to come is meaningless.” “Meaningless” can literally be defined as we do not know what it will be or what it all means. This is the definition of a mystery. All of us realize that what is on the other side of death is a mystery, however, that does not imply that it will be futile.

#### Work Within the Boundaries – 11:9-10; 12-1

<sup>9</sup> Rejoice, young man, during your childhood, and let your heart be pleasant during the days of young manhood. And follow the impulses of your heart and the desires of your eyes. Yet know that God will bring you to judgment for all these things. <sup>10</sup> So, remove grief and anger from your heart and put away pain from your body, because childhood and the prime of life are fleeting. <sup>1</sup> Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, “I have no delight in them”; Ecclesiastes 11:9-12:1 (NASB95)

If we are to invest in life and live our lives with the realization that an unknown situation (mystery) is awaiting us beyond death’s door, then we should learn what “wisdom” would teach us regarding the limits we should put on ourselves in life. Our endeavors to enjoy life should be influenced by the knowledge that “it is appointed unto man, once to die and then the judgment.” Since that is the truth of the matter, then it would behoove us to know what things and what ways are in alignment with the principles and values of the Judge.

In a very practical sense, we can see that we do have limits of behavior that are imposed by civil and criminal laws if we are living in civilized society. If we go beyond those limits and the indiscretions are discovered by those in positions of authority, then we are (theoretically) brought to judgment. These limits and penalties are put into place to prevent us from harming others and some are there to prevent us from harming ourselves. What about harmful behaviors that are not limited by the laws of the government? Who has the responsibility to “police” our actions so that we don’t harm others or ourselves? If we are adults, then it all comes down to the bottom line of “self-control.” While there may be some accountability imposed by social pressure or by friends and family, the actual responsibility lies with the individual.

Solomon recognized that care or self-control was needed in both the emotional and physical realms of existence. On the emotional side, self control should be exercised in managing grief and anger. There are times when we will experience grief. It is a normal human emotion, however, it is something that we are “pass through” and not a place to take up residence. As David said in the twenty-third Psalm, “Yea, though I walk through the valley . . .” We have losses and we grieve, but we need to put every loss into proper perspective and come to the conclusion that we are thankful for the time we had the possession or the family member and

for the joy we experienced and realize that life must go on as we move toward the ultimate destiny that is beyond our time here on earth. A similar argument can be made regarding anger. We need to deal with our anger, put it into proper perspective, learn from it and move on.

On the physical side, Solomon advised us to “put away pain from your body.” We could argue that no one likes to be hurt or injured, however, many people do engage in dangerous activities that give them an elevated risk of injury. No one likes to be sick or have serious illness, however, not everyone exercises discretion in getting proper nutrition or avoiding behaviors that could result in debilitating diseases. I remember arguments that people used to make regarding the practice of drinking alcohol or smoking tobacco. The argument was that since our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit that we should honor God by not damaging it by smoking or drinking. That may be a good argument, however, Solomon brought it down to an argument that even an atheist could understand. We have one life and anything we do to harm ourselves emotionally or physically is going to bring a net loss in enjoying life since we shorten the “prime” time and we wind up experiencing the ills of aging sooner rather than later.

How do we know what to do to minimize the risks and extend the prime time? The starting point is to keep the word of God in the forefront of our thinking and allow Godly principles to be our guide in everything we do and in the way we view the events that we experience in life. The time to start this process is while we are still young. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

#### Revere and Obey God – 12:11-14

<sup>11</sup> The words of wise men are like goads, and masters of *these* collections are like well-driven nails; they are given by one Shepherd. <sup>12</sup> But beyond this, my son, be warned: the writing of many books is endless, and excessive devotion *to books* is wearying to the body. <sup>13</sup> The conclusion, when all has been heard, *is*: fear God and keep His commandments, because this *applies to* every person. <sup>14</sup> For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil. Ecclesiastes 12:11-14 (NASB95)

“Don’t put all your eggs in one basket” and “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” are examples of well-driven nails that can help us remember the wisdom that has its origins in the word of God. We can find all kinds of self-help books and “how-to” processes for almost anything we need to accomplish in the course of living life that will allow us to enjoy the good times and learn from the bad times. Apparently, such writings were around during Solomon’s time and he added to the collection of such works. It would be impossible to read and remember everything that had been written on these matters, however, there are some basics that we can know and put into practice. The starting point and best advice that we can discover is simply this: “Fear God and keep His commandments.” Solomon’s argument of why we need to do this was cast in terms of man’s selfish interest of avoiding the consequences of the judgment that all of us will eventually face. A better motivation would be to simply honor and respect God Who saved us and made us His children through the new birth. We have a hymn that we occasionally sing that was written in 1887 by John Sammis that states it a very simple way: Trust and Obey.