

# Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

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[ 0 : 0 1 ] I wonder if you are excited for 2020. I genuinely wonder, and please come tell me afterwards, if you're excited about the new year. Perhaps you're excited about making future plans or the possibility of a clean slate and a fresh decade to work at your projects, make healthy resolutions or tick-off items off the bucket list. I'm certainly looking forward to getting married in 2020 and owning my first ever kilt. Joining a yoga for beginners class is still to be confirmed for my resolutions this year. Maybe you're not looking forward to the new year. Perhaps excited is definitely the wrong adjective to use regarding your feelings about the bells and the subsequent year thereafter. Maybe it's because you're acutely aware of the anticlimactic nature of New Year's parties, or you're certainly not looking forward to the first couple of days in January as the harsh reality that is ordinary life returns following the food-fueled escapism of the last week or so.

On a more serious note, many of us in the congregation will have a more cautious and maybe watchful perspective on the new year. Our 2020 vision is not as clear as it is for others.

What do I mean? Well, some of us might be moving away. Some of us have big and important decisions to make about the future. Some of us are hurting or have been bereaved. These, no doubt, will have a significant impact on your and our outlook when we look forwards. I'll confess that as well as being very excited about my upcoming nuptials, I'm also really conscious of the enormity of the beautiful task ahead of me. Earning the right to lead my wife and our family by asking every day, how can I put her needs before my own, is not only going to be difficult, but also something I know I will fail at regularly. So God, help us, truly. I imagine that many questions plague us as we look forwards to the future.

Having said that, what is the right perspective for looking forwards? Is there such a thing? Is there a wise and godly perspective for casting our minds forwards? I think that there is a right and wise perspective for the future, and the Bible can help us with this. Therefore, there are two things I'd like us to achieve in our study of our passage tonight. I'd like us to discover, firstly, a wise perspective on life and the future, and secondly, I'd like us to make some wise resolutions. I trust that with God's help, these can help us as we enter the new year. But before we actually get to these, this wise perspective and these wise resolutions, let me set the scene a little bit. Tonight, we're going to be looking at the book of Ecclesiastes, a book that forms part of the wisdom literature of the Bible, and quite helpfully, a book that we went through in our guys' Bible study for the last three or four months. The book of Ecclesiastes gets its name from the Hebrew word Koheleth, which means gatherer.

This can either mean somebody who gathers proverbs together and compiles them, but most likely it means someone who gathers people to teach them. This is why our guide through the book of Ecclesiastes is called the teacher, or in some translations, the preacher. My sister-in-law very helpfully told me that the name for the book of Ecclesiastes in the German Bible is Prediger. That pronunciation is probably terrible, but it means preacher. She should have helped me with the pronunciation.

[ 4 : 12 ] Who is the preacher? Well, it's not altogether important for our purposes this evening, and many Christians have disagreed on this matter. You can ask me later what my thoughts on it are. The message of the book isn't altered in any way by knowing who authored the book. More importantly, what is the message of the book of Ecclesiastes? And this might be helpful for us as we look at our passage.

Well, forgive the apparently vicious uppercut, but let me answer that in the form of a question. The message of the book of Ecclesiastes is, are you prepared to die? I put this question to the guys of our guys' Bible study every Monday for four months, and I put it to you. The preacher certainly asks it throughout the entirety of the book. The preacher is concerned with the meaning of life, and he is concerned with the meaning of life this side of eternity. Consequently, he has ventured towards finding meaning in every way possible. He has tried the realms of knowledge and academia, laughter and pleasure, projects, careerism, family, friendships, all whilst coming to the same conclusion. All these things can be enjoyed in their right place when acknowledged, when acknowledging that they are a gift from God. However, ultimately, they are all fleeting. They are all chevel. The Hebrew word that we have translated in our Bibles as meaningless or vanity. In other words, these things are elusive or confusing, fleeting, often disappointing. How does the preacher reach this conclusion? Well, he's lived. He has endeavored to find meaning in this broken and sinful world and has found that ultimately death is inevitable and it is the ultimate equalizer. Thankfully, the message doesn't end there. The preacher confronts us with the harsh reality of life that is death, but tells us that death can be a teacher to us. We can learn to live by preparing to die. Once we accept that death is coming to us all, that it can be apparently unfair and random, but that God is in control and that for Christians who fear God, there is hope beyond this side of eternity, then death can teach us to live and moreover, it can teach us to live well. Am I prepared to die? The more I wrestle with that question, the more I'm becoming braver to say yes. Do I want to? No. Nevertheless, I want God to prepare me and teach me to live well in gratitude and in service to him. I commend to you the book of Ecclesiastes, a fantastic book that is incredibly relevant to life today and a surprisingly good tool in evangelism and apologetics as it deconstructs the things that we seek to find meaning in that aren't God himself. But let's get to our text, a wise perspective for the new year. What's your perspective on life, I wonder? What is a perspective? Well, it's your attitude towards something, isn't it? It's your outlook, your point of view, the lens by which you understand something and make decisions. I wonder where you get your perspective about the world and the future. I wonder where you get it from. When looking at life itself, the perspective of Ecclesiastes is different and counterintuitive. The teacher tells us to look forwards to the future in light of the things that we don't know and in light of the things that we can't know. Interestingly, he says that once we realize that there are things we will never know, it changes the way we think about the future.

Life's uncertainty is meant to shape our perspective on the things that are certain, on life itself. This may sound a little confusing, but hopefully as we explore some of these things in detail, we'll understand what the wise perspective God wants us to have is, and that it's in fact quite simple.

Firstly, as part of this wise perspective, let me start off by saying this, and this is what our text tells us. We can't predict the future. Let's reread verses one and two together.

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 Bible tells us that we don't know the future. There's some strange language in my version that I read about soggy bread, or in your version with shipping grain, and we will come to that, but ultimately these verses remind us of a truth we know, but often ignore. We can't predict the future, and uncertainty is a huge part of life. In the words of the teacher, and in verse two, you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. Let's take our congregation for example. We are already facing the somewhat uncertain, near future of being ministerless. In light of this uncertainty, and in light of the fact that we don't know exactly what our church's life is going to look like in 2020, do we become inactive and passively wait for the future to become clearer, or do we lean on God hard and become part of the answer to our own prayers as we love and galvanize around each other? A wise perspective on the future begins by admitting that we don't know what's going to happen. Similarly, and related to this idea of not being able to predict the future, the preacher tells us that we can't guarantee if something will succeed or fail. Let's look at verse six, and verses one and two and verse six are just parallels of each other if you are paying attention to the structure of this little extract of the scriptures. Verse six says, sow your seed in the morning and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. I imagine that you intend to be successful in your New Year's resolutions. I'm sure that in most things in life we aim to be successful.

[ 11 : 08 ] We don't aim for failure. I don't know, maybe you're an eternal pessimist and who always aims for failure, and any small victory is quite uplifting. Ultimately, however, we don't know whether something we venture into will be successful or not. Whether it's your university degree, a promising career path in your chosen field, the right job, the right relationship, many of us embark on something with high hopes only to find that not only does God not want us doing that, but the way that he shows us that he doesn't want us doing that is by allowing us to fail. Robbie Burns put it quite well when he penned, the best plans of mice and men often go awry. So we can't predict the future, we can't know whether something is going to succeed or going to fail, but we also can't know, and we also don't know, how to do that which only God can do. Let's read verse 5 and read this with me. As you do not know the path of the wind or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the maker of all things. When I occasionally do park run on Aberdeen Beach, and as I run on the promenade, I can see adorning the coastline, adorning the horizon, some beautiful windmills, and you might not appreciate the windmills, I really don't mind.

We could fill the country with them, and we could, you know, be totally eco-friendly by 2050, as some of our political parties have suggested, but do we really know where, when, how, and why the wind blows?

Equally, as much as ultrasound technology has advanced over the millennia since the writing of this book, do we really grasp the complexity of cells splitting and the beauty of the body being formed in the womb? The psalmist tries his best to describe poetically the process, and you'll know this verse, you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Who does the knitting? How does consciousness and awareness happen? How does life itself happen?

There are certain things that only God knows. Interestingly, in chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes, the preacher tells us the purpose of not knowing that which only God can know, and I'll read to you verse 11 and 14. You can follow if you like, but I'll read it for you. Verse 11 says, He has also set eternity in the human heart, yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. And then I jump to verse 14. I know that everything God does will endure forever.

Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away from it. God does it so that people will fear him. In other words, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God lead us to praise him.

[ 14 : 35 ] As believers who live in a broken and sinful world this side of eternity, we are to be comforted by the knowledge that we don't know everything. We learn, perhaps through painful experiences, to be content with not knowing. Alternatively, to know everything about everything, to have all the knowledge all the time, and at all the right times, well, that's the sort of control that the book of Ecclesiastes actually warns us against. We cannot know, therefore we don't have to know. Trying to know everything, or even worse, pretending to know everything is foolish, not wise. What does the teacher teach us by reminding us of the uncertainty of life? How does he help us with our perspective by telling us that we can't know if something will succeed or fail? How does it serve us going into the next year that we remember that God knows everything and we don't? I hope that as we look at some wise resolutions, this will become especially apparent. So, some wise resolutions, and I've got three for us, and I hope that they will serve you well into the next year. They're give generously, pray persistently, and share the gospel always. And hopefully as we look at the imagery in our text, it will become apparent how it is that we got there. So, give generously. What do we mean by this? How does the teacher encourage us to resolve to give generously? If I'm to be transparent, I chose that heading partly for the alliteration, when in fact a more accurate interpretation of the teacher's message is be wildly wise in your giving. Be counter culturally generous. Let's reread verses one and two again. 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. You won't have this in the Pew Bible, but this idea of casting your bread upon the waters isn't a call to generous duck feeding. Rather, it can be understood in a couple of ways that we'll explore. One meaning of this expression is a reference to commerce and shipping, and that's more or better suited to the translation of our church Bibles. You send out your ship filled with your produce, and after many days, although you don't see the bread again or the trade that happens on the other side of the world, your profits will return to you. Some wise advice in being entrepreneurial.

And in connection with verse two, this is arguably some wisdom encouraging us to pursue many ventures and diversifying. That may be true, and there's lots of wisdom in that, but what leads me to believe that this is a call to counter cultural generosity is some of the words used, and I'm going to use my translation that I've got in front of me. Firstly, the word cast can be, or that you have a ship your grain, can more literally be understood as send out. In verse two, we have the word give, or you have the word invest. I have portions in my possession, and they are to be given to seven or even to eight.

This idea of giving your portions, it's language that's reminiscent of Deuteronomy, and language that is reminiscent of the sacrificial offerings, and making provision for the Levites, the priests, who didn't have a means to feed themselves. And these offerings that were given, the Levites would take some from that.

That's the images that should be appearing in your mind as you read the text, and these words of giving portions. We know that in biblical language, the number seven represents perfection and completeness.

Therefore, to suggest that we give portions to even eight is a call to give beyond that which is normal or expected. We are called to give to the nth degree.

[ 18 : 59 ] I wonder what that will look like for you in 2020. I wonder, have you even considered a subsection, perhaps, within your resolutions that involve others, or giving? Maybe setting aside some money for every occasion we have one of our mission partners come speak to us at an evening service. I don't know what it will look like for you. However, what the teacher says is that a wise resolution this year, and the norm for the wise Christian is to give generously. We can't predict the future. It is so uncertain. Therefore, let's not make the mistake of exclusively thinking about our things or my stuff. Jesus certainly had some incredibly strong words for the rich man who only thought about building bigger stores for his grain. I guess to put it in a way that helps me understand this, I think of two friends who give me very different advice regarding the future.

One says to me, the future is uncertain, so don't put all your eggs in the same basket. Spread the risk and invest in multiple ventures. He's a bit of a financial advisor, my friend. The other says, life is uncertain, so why not have a little fun and have pudding first? A bit of a hedonist, my friend.

Both these bits of advice have some degree of sense to them, right? Well, the Bible says this, life and the future is uncertain, so give your pudding away. A counter-cultural generosity that takes the form of action towards others. So biblical and enriching. If you want further proof of this principle, then hear the words of Jesus himself. I'm reading from Mark 8. Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and the gospel will save it. How do you know you're giving generously? Well, it's a sacrifice. It will cost you and it might hurt. And please don't think this is exclusively about money. Maybe for you it's a struggle to give of your time in service. The food bank still needs men to help on Wednesdays if you are willing and able. Take the best of you, the best of what you are, and give it away. The wise resolution that the Bible gives us is undoubtedly harder than your average weight loss goal. It's a little stark and shocking, I guess, because we're used to our comfort zones, aren't we? Having said that, Ecclesiastes helpfully reminds us that you might be dead this time next week. If so, what do you wish you could have done with your money and your gifts, your time, even your life?

So give generously. Secondly, though, pray persistently. Where am I getting this idea of praying persistently?

Well, another way of understanding the meaning of casting your bread upon the waters relates to a wonderfully interesting feature of the River Nile and other rivers around the world. Quite predictably and cyclically, the River Nile would flood and water levels would go down. This would leave a rich and fertile soil in and surrounding the river. If we understand the word bread that we've got in verse 1 as the way Isaiah uses the word, and it's the same Hebrew word that he uses in Isaiah 28 as bread corn or grain, and you guys have grain in the church Bible. Then maybe you can see where I'm going with this. I wonder, do you ever stop yourself from praying for someone or something because it seems too big or too impossible to happen?

[ 23 : 30 ] Have you maybe stopped praying for that family member or friend who doesn't know Jesus as Lord and Savior because you've become discouraged? God says this to you and to me tonight. Don't stop praying for them. Don't stop praying.

You have no idea what sort of amazing and fruitful and beautiful things I can do with a small bit of grain cast into the vastness of the waters. The prayer that to us may seem unanswered or no longer worth even praying, God can answer and the return can be abundant. You don't know what will happen in the future, so don't stop praying and see the great things God can do in our lives. We don't know who all will be saved.

I'd love it if all were saved, so don't stop praying for those close to you and those not so close to you that they may also receive that wonderful gift that is salvation through Jesus. So pray persistently.

Thirdly, and our final resolution, share the gospel always. Let's read verse 6 once more.

The imagery of sowing and reaping here shouldn't be confined to agriculture or make you think about farmers. The Bible most frequently uses this imagery of sowing and reaping to talk about what we do with the Word of God. You'll remember the famous parable in Mark 4 of the farmer who sowed seed in four different types of soil. At the end of the passage, Jesus clearly states, the sower sows the Word of God.

[ 25 : 43 ] Therefore, of all the things that we could be sowing out there in the world, the most important is the Word of God that contains the good news of the gospel. If we're to take the command and what we have in verse 6 seriously, the idea of sowing our seed in the morning and that evening not letting our hands be idle, then this is a call to work hard for the kingdom of God, to be bold and entrepreneurial with the gospel, to be creative and do it all the time, morning and evening. Even if you're not sure if it's going to work or what will work in sharing the gospel, try it. You don't know how someone may respond to the gospel, so share it. Having said that, you do actually have to share it. We need to sow in order to reap the harvest. After giving God a full day's work, we trust in his sovereignty to do the rest.

Jesus is God's own Son, sent to solve the problem of our sin and separation from God. How? By living a perfect life that we couldn't. By dying on a cross and taking the punishment that our sins deserved.

By resurrecting and triumphing over death and the grave. He has ascended and reigns as king over all the earth. This Jesus wants a relationship with you. How would you word that to a friend next year?

If you want some further help in your resolution to share the gospel always, maybe go back and re-listen to the sermon from this morning. Incredibly challenging to think if in the last calendar year we have said to one person all the great things that God has done for us. As we look forwards to 2020, God doesn't want you being either unrealistically optimistic or unnecessarily pessimistic.

However, he does want you to remember that you don't and can't know everything. The future is uncertain, but that's okay. You are not God and shouldn't seek that control over everything. With that in mind, set yourself resolutions and bucket list items that don't revolve around you.

[ 28 : 26 ] give generously, pray persistently and be bold with the gospel as you share it always in 2020.

Let's pray together. Dear Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word. We thank you for what it has to teach us about the perspective that we ought to have as we look forward to the future.

Help us, Lord, to be comforted rather than crippled by the fact that we don't and can't know everything. Help us, Lord, to be comforted by the fact that the future is uncertain. Heavenly Father, don't make us proud.

Help us not to be proud and wanting to control everything because we can't. And Father, in light of the fact that we can't and don't know everything, help us to set wise resolutions that please you. Help us to give generously. Help us to pray persistently.

And help us, Lord, to share the gospel, share of the good news of Jesus in 2020. Help us to be challenged, to share of the good things that you have done for me and for us.

[ 29 : 54 ] Father, we pray these things in the powerful name of Jesus. Amen.