



ECCLESIASTES 11:1-6

1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. 2 Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth. 3 If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. 4 He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. 5 As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. 6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

STRUCTURE

- I. Diversify your investments in the face of risk (1-2)
- II. Refuse paralysis in the face of risk (3-4)
- III. Diversify your labor—humbly—in light of God's secret work (5-6)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

In chapter 11, Solomon pivots toward the book's conclusion. By the time we arrive here, the Preacher has already dismantled:

- The illusion of lasting gain (1:3; 2:11; 5:10).
- The illusion of novelty—finding something new under the sun (1:9-10; 3:15)
- The illusion of mastery over times and seasons (3:1-8; 7:13-14; 8:6-7)
- The illusion of control through wisdom, righteousness, and toil (1:16-18; 7:15-18; 8:16-17)
- The illusion of immortality or enduring vigor (2:14-16; 6:6; 12:1-7)
- The illusion of guaranteed outcomes (8:14; 9:11; 10:8-9)
- The illusion of utopia—a finally just or pain-free world under the sun (3:16; 4:1; 8:10)

Together, these are variations on the same hope: that we might escape the curse that governs life under the sun. Ecclesiastes strips that hope away—not to induce despair, but to reorient wisdom.

Wisdom resists the illusion; it faces reality. Having just observed the stark contrast between wisdom and folly (ch. 10), the Preacher shifts from diagnosis to exhortation. How we engage our work (11:1-6), enjoy our days (11:7-10), and remember our Creator (12:1-8) together form a trifold of vigorously wise endeavors that prepare the reader for Solomon's epilogue (12:9-14).

The present section centers on work—ours and God's. God's work is secret and unpredictable (11:5). A wise man humbly admits his own ignorance. He knows not whether God has ordained "disaster" (11:1b) or prosperity (11:6). Having learned that God decrees both (7:13-14), the wise man does not retreat like the fool, paralyzed by an endless stream of "what ifs" (11:3-4). Uncertainty stokes vigorous labor, rather than suppressing it. The wise man invests (11:1a). More than that, he diversifies his investment—both of wealth (11:2) and time (11:6a)—trusting that if disaster strikes one endeavor, God, in His mercy, may prosper another (11:6b).

This section teaches us how to work wisely: by accounting for God's work. God ordains the seasons, and we dress for them. God decides outcomes, and we labor for them. We work not because we've surrendered to the illusion of lasting gain, novelty, mastery, control, immortality, guarantees, or utopia, as though *toil* creates *leverage* with God. Rather, we work because we live under the sun—under the curse—in reality.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days. 2 Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what disaster may happen on earth.

—"Cast": Hebrew, *šālah* (or, *shalah*). *The Theological Wordbook of the OT*: "The verb *shalah* means 'to send,' 'to send away,' 'to let loose,' 'to spread.'" It carries the sense of intentional release, not careless loss.

—To send your bread upon the waters only to find it later likely refers to ships trading grain. This agrees with the tenor of the passage, which advises enterprise.

—Two Aramaic proverbs that speak similarly:

- "Scatter thy bread on the water and on the dry land; in the end of the days thou findest it again."
- "Do good, cast thy bread into the water, thou shalt be repaid some day."

—Scholars debate whether the opening line refers to business or personal generosity, for instance, giving bread to the poor. It seems to me that business is primarily in view since giving bread to the poor is not normally done by ships on the high sea.

—“for you will find it after many days”:

- When you refuse to hunker down and hoard—when you take calculated business risks—the Lord will bless you.
- In 10:9, we already learned that business is inherently risky. There, fools took blind risks. Here, they take none. Wisdom calculates the risk, self-protects, and engages.

—“Give a portion to seven, or even to eight”:

- “But divide your investment among many places” (NLT); “Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight” (NIV); “Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight” (NASB).
- The NLT and NIV are “dynamic (or functional) equivalent” translations, meaning they translate phrase by phrase, rather than word by word like the NASB or ESV. Therefore, they maintain more flexibility in summarizing the meaning of Hebrew phrasing, making implicit interpretations explicit. In this case, the team of scholars for the NLT and NIV interpreted verse 2 to be focused more on business ventures than personal finances. The ESV and NASB leave that question open for interpretation. I believe the NLT/NIV scholars got it right (which does not imply ESV/NASB scholars got it wrong). Solomon is continuing the thought of verse 1. Not only should we engage in enterprise (v. 1); we should invest diversely (v. 2).
- While some commentators interpret Ecclesiastes 11:1–2 primarily as an exhortation to personal generosity, that reading does not do justice to the passage as a whole. The imagery, vocabulary, and flow of thought consistently point to commercial enterprise, not almsgiving. Casting bread “upon the waters” fits the world of maritime trade, not hand-to-hand charity; the call to distribute portions “to seven, or even to eight” speaks the language of diversification, not benevolence; and the surrounding verses (11:3–6) are explicitly concerned with labor, risk, timing, and return. Generosity may be a secondary application, but as an interpretation it misidentifies the controlling metaphor. The Preacher is not urging charity in the abstract—he is instructing wisdom in work under uncertainty.
- “to seven, or even to eight”:
 - Seven is the number of completion. Wise investors diversify broadly. They don’t bank their whole venture on one stock, one client, or one deal.
 - As we would say, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”
 - “or even to eight” was a classic Hebrew idiom. For example, Proverbs 30:18 says, “Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand...” Amos 1:3 says, “For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not revoke its punishment.”
 - Scholars name this literary feature: Numerical Ladder. It slows the reader, creates anticipation, and makes the final item in the list more weighty or memorable. For instance, Proverbs 6 lists “six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him.” The first six we expect—pride, deception, murder, conspiracy, evil, false witness—but the seventh, the pinnacle, we often downplay: “one who sows discord”. The reader naturally asks, “Could this really fit in the same conversation as bloodshed?” It lands like a knockout blow. Yes, the LORD hates sowing strife like He hates murder.
 - In Ecclesiastes 11:2, “seven, or even to eight” intends the same rhetorical effect. If “seven” is already the number of completion, how could the Preacher possibly expect *further* diversification? Yet, he does. Wisdom RUTHLESSLY diversifies investments. It stubbornly resists the folly of hyper-simplification, specialization, and singularity.
 - Wisdom is not a one-trick pony.

—“for you know not what disaster may happen on the earth”:

- Ignorance of the future has been a consistent feature of Ecclesiastes:
 - 2:18–19: “I hated all my toil in which I toil under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to the man who will come after me, and **who knows** whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun. This also is vanity.”
 - 3:11: “He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that **he cannot find out** what God has done from the beginning to the end.”
 - 6:12: “For **who knows** what is good for man while he lives the few days of his vain life, which he passes like a shadow? For **who can tell man what will be** after him under the sun?”
 - 7:14: “In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that **man may not find out** anything that will be after him.”
 - 8:7: “For he **does not know** what is to be, for **who can tell him how it will be?**”
 - 9:1: “But all this I laid to heart, examining it all, how the righteous and the wise and their deeds are in the hand of God. Whether it is love or hate, **man does not know**; both are before him.”

- 9:11: "Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but **time and chance happen to them all.**"
- 10:14: "A fool multiplies words, though **no man knows what is to be, and who can tell him what will be after him?**"
- The fool thinks he knows what will happen and thus multiplies words like a know-it-all (10:14). The fool's delusion explains not only his long speeches but his entire strategy for life. He puts his eggs in one basket, expecting a windfall. Instead, he grasps two handfuls of vanity—a chasing after the wind.
- Wisdom plans for disaster, not only by building shelter, but by building a diverse portfolio. It resists the mirage of invulnerability. It does not arrogantly claim, "I am so wise that disaster won't strike me." Calamity strikes all—the wise and foolish alike. God determines the day of adversity and the day of prosperity (7:13-14). We plan for the former and pray for the latter.

3 If the clouds are full of rain, they empty themselves on the earth, and if a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie. 4 He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap.

—These verses interrelate through repetition. Both refer to "clouds". Mention of a falling "tree" in verse 3 finds its parallel in the "wind" of verse 4, which blew the tree down.

—Verse 3 emphasizes our impotence versus God's sovereign power. God decides when rain and trees fall. He decrees whether falling rain yields "disaster" (v. 2)—floods—or blessing. He tells wind whether to blow "to the south or to the north". The tree it knocks down could land on your home, or it might provide wood to build a home. Disaster and blessing, failure and success, are in God's hands.

—"He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap."

- Those who busy their minds with endless "What-if's," never act. Ignorance about the future should not paralyze us ("will not sow... will not reap") but motivate us.
- Because we don't know the future, we must act now—and in diverse ways. Sow different kinds of seeds. Plant them in varied locations. If a flood knocks out one field, reap from the other.
- In our modern economy, no less, wisdom pursues multiple income streams. By some estimates, AI threatens to knock out (or severely alter) 47-80% of jobs. Entire industries can be disrupted faster than workers can retrain. Companies downsize without warning, and loyalty is rarely reciprocated. Skills that were scarce yesterday can become automated commodities tomorrow. Economic shocks—pandemics, recessions, geopolitical conflict—arrive unannounced. Inflation quietly erodes purchasing power even when income appears stable. As we observed during COVID, health crises and government decisions can interrupt earning capacity overnight. In such a world, wisdom does not cling to a single field or stake survival on one harvest. It plants broadly, works creatively, and spreads its risk across many furrows, confident that while one field may fail, another may yet yield fruit.
- I'm reminded of Proverbs 22:13 (repeated in 26:13): "The sluggard says, 'There is a lion outside! I shall be killed in the streets!'"—Imaginary danger becomes an excuse for paralysis. The world is full of danger. This should motivate calculated risk, not inaction. Also, our "What-ifs" are often inflated. Wisdom asks not only, "What if this fails?" but also, "What if this works?"

—Kaiser: "Men who insist on certainties or even just the most favorable conditions prior to acting in life never will do anything (11:4)... the duty is ours; the results are God's."

—Kidner: "One of the frustrating things of life observed in 9:11ff was the fact that time and chance can overturn our finest plans. If that can be a paralyzing thought, it can also be a spur to action: for if there are risks in everything, it is better to fail in launching out than in hugging one's resources to oneself."

5 As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything. 6 In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

—"As you do not know": Admitting our own ignorance is essential to wisdom.

—"the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child": Bones begin forming around five to six weeks in utero. This image affirms that both physical and spiritual life exist within the womb, yet Solomon's concern is not to specify the moment when the spirit enters the body. Writing in a pre-scientific context, he is simply pointing to the mystery of God's hidden work. The emphasis falls not on when life begins, but on who gives it and how little of His work lies within human control.

—"the work of God":

- Examples in Ecclesiastes (exact phrase or similar):
 - 3:11: "**He has made** everything beautiful in its time... yet so that he cannot find out **what God has done** from the beginning to the end."

- 3:14: "I perceived that **whatever God does** endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it."
- 7:13–14: "**Consider the work of God**: who can make straight what he has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: **God has made** the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him."
- 8:17: "Then I saw **all the work of God**, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun."
- 9:1: "The righteous and the wise and their deeds are **in the hand of God**."
- God made the times and seasons, and He filled them with events of His choosing. His sovereign work in history parallels His most artful laboratory—the womb. In ancient times, God's quiet work of multiplying cells to create a human being were perfectly invisible. So it is with God's plan. We have no idea what He's doing.
- I find it fascinating that in a passage about the work of man, this verse spotlights the work of God. Wisdom's work considers God's work—especially, it's most prominent feature: secrecy. Wisdom does not assume it knows the future or aim to control it. Wisdom knows its own ignorance and works accordingly.
- Kaiser: "Thus Solomon has repeatedly coaxed, urged, argued, pressed, and begged us as wise men and women to get off the dead center of attempting to outguess God and His works. We must earnestly and diligently get into life's work. It is enough to know, as far as the progress and results of our work are concerned, that God is also at work. It is enough to know that He has given us the knowledge of the broad spectrum of His plan."
- Gibson: "We manage, but God actually makes."

—"In the morning... in the evening":

- Verse 2 emphasizes diversity of financial investment; verse 6 highlights diversity, but in how we invest our time.
- The reason is—wisdom knows it knows nothing: "for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good."

—This section on work (11:1-6) recalls Solomon's opening question, which set the tone for the whole book: "What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?" (Eccl. 1:3). Solomon's answer came in the prior verse: "Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (1:2).

—But that's not the whole story. True, our toil does not produce "gain" in terms of lasting satisfaction or security beyond the grave. But equally true is Solomon's teaching that "money answers everything" (10:19), and wisdom pursues a profit (11:1-6).

—How do we harmonize these apparent disparate realities?

- It comes down to orientation: experiencing life as "gift" not "gain". When you fear God—acknowledging your weakness and mortality—you cease toiling for satisfaction independent of God. You stop living like the future bends to your will and work ethic. You take a breath. And you make a choice: to step off the hamster wheel, open your hands, and let God fill them. You enjoy blessing in a cursed world. More than that, you enjoy God through His material blessings. You find that money indeed "answers everything"—not by satisfying that hole in our hearts, but by supplying the means for God to meet our needs and grant us a reprieve.
- At the same time, "opening our hands" to God's material blessing involves more than waiting around. About human labor, Solomon has highlighted two kinds of folly: not just the workaholic slaving for gain, but the drop-out wanting a handout. God blesses us materially—not *instead of* work, but *by means of* work. Wisdom works hard, but not for the "gain" of lasting satisfaction or security. It also works smarter—taking calculated risks (10:9), pausing to sharpen the saw (10:10), and diversifying its investment (11:1-2, 6). Wisdom works in the fear of God. It calculates risk because God holds the future; it sharpens the saw because it knows its own weakness; it diversifies because God alone determines success or failure.
- Solomon's aim is that we pursue profit—without confusing it for "gain."
- In sum, Ecclesiastes calls us to work vigorously without pretending our work is ultimate—to labor fully while holding loosely, to pursue profit without confusing it for gain, and to receive both success and failure from the God who governs all.

—Kidner: "It is a stimulating call, with no thought of faltering, yet no trace of bravado or irresponsibility. The very smallness of our knowledge and control, the very likelihood of hard times (2b), so frequently impressed on us throughout the book, become the reasons to bestir ourselves and show some spirit."