

Ecclesiastes 11:1-5

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-11/ecclesiastes-111-5/>

God determines what will be and His work is beyond our ability to control or understand. Accepting reality, the best we can do is to be intentional about our stewardship, rather than being paralyzed (or blindsided) by uncertainty.

Chapter 11 opens with an image of casting *bread on the surface of the waters*. The word translated *bread* is translated *meal* earlier in [Ecclesiastes 10:19](#). Why would someone cast their bread, or their meal, onto the *surface of the waters* in the first place? It seems Solomon has in mind an image of *bread* in a vessel such as a boat. Otherwise the *bread* would promptly sink. Solomon says we *will find it after many days*. Why not eat the bread when you had it in the first place, or store it in a barn so it is readily accessible?

The principle Solomon seems to be advancing is that we should approach life with an investment mentality. *Bread* is a way to consume our financial resources, and an investment is a deferral of consumption. Rather than consume our *bread* (and then it's gone), we can increase it by investing. The best way to keep something is often to let it go. Interestingly, this is not phrased as a suggestion, but rather a command that asserts cause and effect. To *cast our bread on the surface of the waters* involves releasing control of something precious, our *bread*, our money, our sustenance. The Bible generally portrays the sea as an image of chaos. We are being admonished to *cast* our resources into a sea of uncertainty. The reality is that all of life is a sea of uncertainty.

Whether we launch the bread in a basket or a boat, we don't have control of where it goes, what storms it might encounter, or what tides it may catch. But Solomon asserts that we *will find it after many days*. The opposite attitude would be hoarding. Jesus spoke of a man who decided to hoard his possessions by building extra barns and storing all that he had to fund a long and luxurious retirement. But Jesus noted the man died unexpectedly, and his stored grain did him no good ([Luke 12:16-21](#)). Being "rich toward God" requires continuing to invest our resources in the community around us.

If we want to save our *bread* for later, we would not think to *cast it on the surface of the waters*, but rather to store in a barn, like the rich man in Jesus's illustration. Solomon's assertions indicate that what we would naturally view

as “safe” is really an illusion. And what we consider “risky” is actually quite safe. The “safe” way to keep the things we treasure is to release them into a sea of uncertainty. To let go of possessing.

There are many ways this principle applies. It certainly works with children. If we try to possess them rather than release them at an appropriate age, we lose them. They either miss fulfilling their design, or rebel. But if we release them into the chaos of the world after having invested in teaching them good values, how to make good decisions, what to believe in, and how to view things, then it is likely they will come back to us in due time, as fully functioning adults ([Proverbs 22:6](#)).

The same is true in other relationships. When we attempt to possess people, to control them, we actually push them away. They have a desire to escape captivity and gain their freedom. But when we honor their freedom, we invite them into a healthy relationship.

Trying to hoard relationships ruins community. Attempting to hoard possessions ruins us. Throughout the Bible there is an emphasis on the importance of generosity. When we invest our time, energy, or money in God’s work, we lay up treasures in heaven. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus admonishes us to lay up treasure in heaven.

This requires that we follow Solomon’s principle and cast our time, energy, focus, and other resources into a sea of uncertainty—the circumstances of life. We might do something for someone that they don’t appreciate. Or even that leads to an unintended consequence. However, seeking to lay up treasure in heaven not only *casts* our *bread* into a sea of uncertainty, it ensures we will possess it forever. We also gain an additional benefit, it directs our hearts toward heaven, for “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” ([Matthew 6:19-21](#)).

It follows then that we ought to avoid hoarding in any aspect of life and approach all of life as an investor. We control very little in this life; with most things the best we can do is release control and trust God. But we can do so with the principles taught in Ecclesiastes. When we direct the few things we do control, Solomon guides us toward industry, wisdom and faith.

Solomon advises us to properly view our life as an investment. An investment in another person, a future generation, or an investment in eternity.

A business venture involving selling grain overseas might be a good illustration of a proper investment mentality. It first requires transferring custody of the grain to the shippers, who will launch a vessel onto the *surface of the waters*. We can't cling to the grain in order to invest it. We must let it go, *cast* it, hoping for a profitable return. Any investment requires some sort of transfer of custody. Some degree of release, trust, and hope.

Similarly, any investment involves a gap of time. The return for an overseas grain sale would take *many days* to realize. Willingness to defer eating *bread* now so there might be more *bread* later is the essence of any investment. Solomon, as a man with tremendous wealth and wisdom, likely understood having an investment mentality as well as anyone who ever lived. Laying up treasure in heaven requires what we hope is a lengthy gap of time between the investment and the reward.

Verse 2 can also be understood in an investment context, encouraging us to diversify our risks. Solomon urges us to *divide our portion to seven, or even to eight* because of uncertainty. *For you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth*. It is common investment practice to limit concentration in any one investment to protect against risk. The concept of insurance is an application of this principle. Everyone pays a little into a pool because usually only a few will experience *misfortune*. Solomon recommends one in eight, or 12.5% as a maximum exposure for any one investment.

Since we can properly view anything with an investment perspective, we can think of our time in a similar manner. We each have 168 hours in any week. And we must choose how to allocate those hours between investing in family, friends, personal development, workplace, recreation exercise, etc. One application of Solomon's admonition here is to urge awareness. Are we aware of how we spend our resources? Our time and money? Are we being deliberate about how we are allocating resources, or just floating along? Being deliberate and having an investment mentality is advised, for *you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth*.

Some interpret this verse to promote generosity (the word for *divide* can also be translated "give"). Dividing because we don't know *what misfortune may occur on the earth* supports that Solomon has in mind an investment principle. However, generosity should be viewed as a part of our "investment portfolio"—how we allocate our resources of time and money. Giving can be a part of how we diversify, for we never know when our opportunity to serve others and lay up treasures in heaven may be terminated, by any sort

of *misfortune* ([Matthew 6:20](#); [Luke 12:13-21](#)). It is important to do good for others while we have the opportunity.

As we consider how to invest our resources of time and talent, we need to bear in mind that cause/effect is what it is, not what we wish it to be. Investing with an unrealistic perspective is a bad idea. When *clouds are full of rain*, they inevitably *deposit rain*. Whether we like it or not. So we should invest accordingly. When we see rain coming, we should invest our resources in a manner that takes advantage of rain, like planting a crop, rather than investing our resources in a manner that would be ruined by rain, like planning a picnic.

Next Solomon tells us *whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies*. When we see a circumstance, it just is, no matter how it got that way. The *tree lies* where it *lies*, irrespective of which way it fell. When we are considering our resources, and how to invest them, it is important to see things as they are. To embrace reality as it is. It is a human tendency to see what we want to see instead of seeing what really is. Solomon wants us to see truly. A fact is a fact. How it became a fact does not affect whether it is a fact. Perhaps Solomon is urging us to accept what is, then make wise investments in what might be. All the while accepting that we must let go and recognize we do not control outcomes.

Investing requires being proactive. Our job is to see what is, then improve upon what is by making wise investments. However, getting distracted can prevent us from this important stewardship. Instead of preparing to *sow seeds to reap a harvest* when rain is coming, *he who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap*. When we are distracted by amusements or idleness, investment opportunities are missed. This can be at home, missing opportunities to engage with children or family. It can be anywhere and take any form. Investment opportunities of all sorts abound, if we are aware and deliberate to live life with an investment focus. But distractions abound as well.

As we live with an investment orientation, it is important we see things as they are. And one part of reality is that our understanding is exceedingly limited. Solomon emphasizes this by telling us God is at work, and *we do not know the activity of God, who makes all things*. Our job is to invest to the best of our ability. But God will determine the outcomes. We can leave outcomes to Him and trust that His ways are higher than ours ([Romans 11:33](#)). Trying to comprehend God through reason and experience is “hebel,” a vaporous mystery.

We should not have the illusion that we've figured out the world around us, or that we have God figured out. Solomon insists that we *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*. The more modern technology allows humans to delve into the wonders of creation, the greater the mystery becomes how the creation designed with such intricate detail could possibly function with such amazing order.

As we follow Solomon's advice to wisely invest our resources of time and treasure, we need to always bear in mind that gaining understanding solely based on reason and experience is "hebel," vanity, striving after the wind. Our only ability to make what is vaporous tangible is through faith ([Hebrews 11:1](#)).

That we *do not* understand (*know*) the *activity of God who makes all things* has been a major focus of the book. Solomon discovered this through seeking and failing to understand the meaning of life by exercising reason and experience apart from faith. His quest was utterly frustrated in one respect. He desired to understand the cause-and-effect relationships of all that God does, but was unable to grasp it ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#); [Ecclesiastes 7:14](#); [Ecclesiastes 8:17](#)).

However, Solomon's quest was successful in another respect. He learned how to accept reality. The *tree* is where it *falls*. The truth of reality is that the *activity of God who makes all things* is beyond our grasp. Trying to exercise our intellect to see as God sees is "hebel." Vanity. Trying to grasp vapor. Purpose and peace only comes through the kind of reason and experience founded on faith. Without faith our quest to understand will only discover chaos and meaninglessness.

Biblical Text:

¹Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days.²Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth.³If 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.⁴He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.⁵Just 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.