

How do I stop wasting my life?

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Date: 27 September 2020

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[0 : 00] Well, the Roman poet Horace, that's Horace, wrote Carpe Diem, quam minimum credula postero, which I'm sure you all know means seize the present day and trust tomorrow as little as possible.

Carpe Diem means seize the day. Now, Carpe Diem was made popular, certainly for my generation, by the film Dead Poets Society, starring Robin Williams. Mr. Keating, who played Robin Williams, gathered his English class together in the school, in their grand hall, their entrance hall, and this is what he said to them. He said, lads, we are food for worms, because believe it or not, each and every one of us in this room is one day going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die. And then he told them to look closely at all the pictures of the alumni on the wall, photos of hopeful students who are now dead. And then he asked his students what they would plan to do with the rest of their lives. And then he challenged them to seize the day, Carpe Diem, to grasp the opportunity and to live life to the full. Now, the sad irony is that the actor, Robin Williams, who popularized seize the day, committed suicide just a few years ago at his home in California, and he was aged 63. And so if we, this afternoon, were to home in on the big idea in these verses in Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verse 1 to 6, then the big idea would be seize the day, because the teacher of Ecclesiastes doesn't want us to waste our lives.

And so in his book, the main body of which he's shared his personal search for meaning for us, he's discovered that there's plenty meaninglessness in life, and so he's looking at where we might find meaning. But now as he nears the end of his book, what he wants to do is to urge us to seize the day and to make the most of the opportunities that God has given to us in this life. And so in Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verse 1 to 6, we're reminded that there is uncertainty in life, and there is an inevitability to life, and so we must take responsibility for life. And so those are our three points this afternoon. One, there is uncertainty in life, verse 1 and 2, and there is secondly, an inevitability to life, verse 3 to 5, and so we must take responsibility for life. Thirdly, in verse 6. So first of all, there is uncertainty in life, verse 1 and 2. Life is full of uncertainty, and we all know this. And so the teacher of Ecclesiastes has already made this clear throughout his book, but we know it because we live life in this world. And that's why he doesn't want us to live life without reference to God. Because life makes best sense when we recognize life as being a gift from the God who made us, who has given it to us for us to enjoy and to use for him.

And so we need to seize the day now, because we don't know what the future will hold. Just check out the images that he gives us in verse 1 to 2. He says, Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Give portions to 7, yes to 8, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land. Now, I don't think he's talking here about feeding the ducks, casting your bread on the waters. And it is hard to know what he is talking about. And so commentators suggest a number of different ways to read his instructions here.

[3 : 42] But it seems to me that the best way to understand them is in terms of wise investment. And perhaps specifically referring to sea trade. But we should also understand that he's talking about a general attitude to life, about how we should approach life amidst all the uncertainty and unpredictability.

And so the image of bread is a good one, and it's used in the sense of our resources. Our bread is our resources. And so the instruction is to invest them in the hope of a good return. And so the picture of international sea trade, casting your bread upon the waters, is quite a good one. So just think of a ship with grain sent out, sailing to foreign lands, to then return many days later, making a profit from the initial investment. So the advice he's giving is, nothing ventured, nothing gained. It's about wisely investing what we have. Because we'll never get any return if we don't, first of all, invest.

It's a common sense principle, isn't it? So he's saying here, don't hold on to everything that you've got, because you'll never achieve anything if all you do is play it safe and you aren't prepared to take any risks. And so when we've got the business advice that he's giving, then we can apply it to the spiritual business of God's kingdom. Because our attitude to life and our approach to life should be one of faith and not fear. Because if we believe in God, we've got to ask ourselves, do we really live by faith? Or do we live by fear? Because the fearful approach will be to have a super cautious, risk-free life. Because fear can paralyze us into doing little and investing nothing. But if we live by faith, then we'll trust in God in everything and for everything. But he's not saying here that we should throw caution to the wind or be irresponsible with what we have. What he is saying is that we shouldn't be afraid to go for it. And we shouldn't be afraid to seize the opportunities. And so if verse one advises nothing ventured, nothing gained, then verse two is advising don't put all your eggs in one basket.

You've heard that phrase before. And that's probably what the portions of seven or eight refer to. So this is good financial advice to diversify your investments. Invest in multiple places, in multiple different projects. Well, why? Because there is an uncertainty about the future.

And we just don't know when disaster will strike. Our economy is a complete mess, because nobody knew a virus would come and would stop people making money. We don't know when disaster will strike. So he's saying if disaster comes, then a diverse portfolio of investments will protect against you losing everything. I'm available for financial advice later, if you want any or need any. But what he's saying is the uncertainty of life means that we shouldn't just invest well, but we should invest widely. And again, this could refer specifically to sea trade, but the application is wider. So just imagine the person whose whole life is bound up by their work. And it's what they get their identity from. They can't see themselves without relation to their work. And so they have no time for family, no time for friends, no time for fun, no time for fitness, just work, work, work, work. They've invested their entire life into one thing. But what if that one thing fails them? What if they lose the job? What if they suffer a heart attack? What if they have to retire? Well, if their work has been their only and sole focus their whole life, then they'll struggle when their work has been taken away. And that's why the teacher is advising to invest their life not just in one thing, but in a number of things. Because if disaster comes to that one thing, then our whole life will fall apart, because we've got nothing else going on.

[8 : 02] And so his portions of seven and eight also suggest generous investment. Again, this isn't just about business. It's about spiritual business as well. It's a command to be a venture capitalist in the kingdom of God by investing our lives, by investing our livelihoods, because God has given these to us to use for him. And Jesus illustrated this in the parable of the talents in Matthew chapter 25.

In the parable, master goes on a journey, he's got three servants, and he entrusts his servants with his resources, with the talents, with money. And so the two servants doubled the money, and they're commended by their master. Whereas the third servant buried the money in the ground, afraid of his master. He did nothing with it, and so he was condemned by his master. And so the parable is about being good stewards of the talents that God has given us, by using them for him. And so according to Jesus, we make a serious error if we don't invest the talents that God has given us. And that's why we really need to review our life's investments. Not just financially, but what we do with our time and our talents, as well as our treasures. Do we spend most of our time on us? Do we use most of our talents for our benefit? Do we keep most of our treasure for ourselves? If so, then very little will ever be achieved beyond ourselves. We will be very little help to anyone else. But if we invest in people, and projects with our time, our talents and our treasure, well, yes, there will be uncertainty and there will be risk. But there's never a bad return when it comes to God's economy. And so let's not be risk-averse as people when it comes to God's work. Let's not operate out of fear instead of operating with faith, whether that be as individual people or together as a church. We should invest ourselves and what we have as creatively and as widely as we can. And so that's the first point. There is uncertainty in life. Second point is there is an inevitability to life. Just as there is uncertainty in life, we don't know what will happen. There's also inevitability. And there's nothing we can do about it. So look at verse 3 and 4.

So it will rain.

It is inevitable. So the clouds are in the sky. They're full of water. They will pour down rain. And we can anticipate the rain. When we look up and we see the black clouds, we know it's going to rain

soon. They're in the sky. But we can't stop it. There's an inevitability about it. And then trees. We can't stop trees blowing down here, there and everywhere. And wherever they fall, they're big trees. That's where they stay. He's saying these things happen. They're inevitable. [11:23] You can't control them. You can't stop them. And so what should we do? Well, he wants us to acknowledge this inevitability, but so that we don't stop living life. Not letting these inevitable things stop us from doing what we need to do in life. Because we need to seize the day. So just the rain. For example, we live in Glasgow. So, I mean, it rains all the time. I'm surprised that it's sunny today. Normally, it's always raining in Glasgow. And so if we were to ever wait for the rain to stop before we did something, we'll never get that thing done because it rains so much.

So he's saying, don't wait for the ideal conditions before you do anything. And then there's the fallen tree. Last year, I had the privilege of going to Lookout Mountain in Tennessee to visit a church there. And then one day, as we were driving up the mountain, it was beautiful. A tree had fallen down right across the road, and there was a huge line of traffic that could get up the mountain. And so what we could have done was sat in the car and said, oh well, these things happen, and just sit there for the rest of the day. But instead, a few of us got out of our cars, and we pushed the tree to the side of the road so we could keep going.

And so the teacher is saying, there are some things that are inevitable in life. You just have to cope with them. There are things that you can't control, but don't let them stop you living life. Because you need to seize the day. Don't let life pass you by because you're waiting for the perfect conditions to come. And so we get this agricultural example in verse 4. It's the farmer. The farmer can't sit in his cottage all day looking at the weather and doing nothing. He can't let the wind or the rain stop him from getting on with his work of planting his seeds. He's got to get on with it, whatever the weather, if he is ever going to reap the harvest. And so the point is, if we spend all our time waiting for the perfect conditions, if we find excuses to put things off, nothing is ever going to happen. And so we need to seize the day. We can't live life saying, if only. If only this happens. If only that was in place. If only they weren't in charge. Because if we adopt that kind of approach to life. We will just watch life go by. I will never achieve anything. And so the teacher is challenging us. He's saying, don't wait for the perfect conditions in life before you do something.

[14:03] Don't wait for life to get any easier. Probably won't. Don't wait for that dream job. You may never get it. Don't wait for the ideal partner. He or she may never come. Don't wait for the kids to grow up.

Don't wait for retirement. Don't wait until you've got more time to seriously investigate Christianity. Or don't delay in placing your faith in Jesus Christ. Seize the day. Don't wait any longer. That's the advice that he's giving here. What he's saying is, act now with courage. Don't acquiesce in comfort. Do it now. So commit to the church plant. Serve in that ministry. Get to know that neighbour. Volunteer in that social project. And of course there will be inevitabilities and there will be uncertainties.

There will be things we don't know and things we don't understand. But they should never be an excuse to hold us back when we need to just jump in. And so he gives an example, verse 5. 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. Okay, so we just don't have a clue about what's going on with the wind. The Met Office do their best, but nobody can fully understand it. My son Matthew went to the STV studios a couple of years ago, because his class were doing a project on the weather. Every primary free class does a project on the weather. And so they met a famous weatherman, so famous I can't actually remember his name, but he was famous. I think he still is. And he explained as much as he could to the children before him. He told them about the come you low nimbus clouds and the strong winds, and it was impressive. The kids were amazed at what they were learning. And yet there's still so much that we don't know. And so the teacher here is saying this is the case. This is the inevitability that there is in life. But he's not just talking about the wind in the sense of the weather wind, because that is the wind. But he seems to be giving us another analogy here too, because in Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the word for wind is the same word as the word for spirit. So he's also talking here about the human spirit. In other words, a living being, a person, and of how the spirit of life originates in an unborn child, about how the mystery of human life conceives and grows in the womb.

[16:49] And so you might be able to get a 4D ultrasound scan, but we can't fully understand the wonderful work of God and how he knits that life together in the womb. And I guess that's why we

should remember in any discussion about abortion that it's a living person we're talking about.

And so here's the deal, according to the teacher. We can't understand the work of God, who is the maker of all things. No one can fully understand what God does in this world, and no one can control any of what God does. Because God has placed limits on our human existence as creatures. We are creatures, and he is the creator. And so what should we do? Well, we must accept that there are some things we can't understand, some things we will never be able to fathom. But even if we can't understand them, we can be sure that God knows what he's doing. And even if we can't understand all his ways, or exactly what he's doing, the teacher is saying this shouldn't stop us seizing the day and living life to the full. Okay, so that's the second point. First, there is an uncertainty in life. Second, there is an inevitability to life. And thirdly, we need to take responsibility for life. Verse 6, the teacher says, we need to take action. So it's fair enough listening to the theory, but you need to stand up, get off your rear end, and do something. You need to seize the day. So verse 6, sow your seed in the morning, and in the evening let your hands not be idle. For you don't know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well. So what does it mean to sow your seed? Well, it's another agricultural analogy of the hard-working farmer. And so the response to uncertainty and to inevitability means we should work hard at everything we do, since we don't know the work that we do, we don't know what will be a success. So the mention of morning and evening suggests working all day, every day, making every moment count. And so he's telling us to get up and go with an entrepreneurial attitude that has no idea what the ultimate outcome will be.

So he's calling us to a faith in God that recognizes we aren't in control. We can't control life in this world. And so we can't plan it out in great detail. And we can't avoid all risks. And we can't protect ourselves from all failures. And so we have to trust that God is in control, and we have to leave the results with him. And so it all comes down to who or what we're living for, about how we are investing our life. Are we investing our life, our life and the things that we have, are we investing them in this world? Or are we investing them in the kingdom of God? Where are we investing our life? Because Jesus spoke really clearly about this in the Sermon on the Mount. He told his followers not to store up for themselves treasures on earth that will eventually be lost anyway. Instead, he said to them that they need to take a longer term investment by storing up treasures in heaven. And so Ecclesiastes and Jesus are forcing us not just to consider our work, what we do, that's why he gives us all this business advice, but also to consider how we invest our lives, what we do with them. Because those who trust in God will want to invest their lives in his service, doing what they can with what he's given them. And so what does this look like then?

Well, the image that the teacher uses here of sowing the seed is one that the Bible picks up again and again and again, probably most famously in Jesus's parable of the sower. It's the story about the farmer who went out to sow his seed and it landed on different kinds of soils. And then when Jesus explained that parable to his disciples, he said the seed is the word. He was meaning the seed is the word of God, the living word that impacts hearers when it comes to them. And so the teachers' command to sow the seed is more than metaphorical here. Because the job of Christians and the job of churches is to sow the seed of the word of God, which is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. Well, how do we do that?

Well, we sow the seed when we read the word of God ourselves, when we meditate on it, when we go and do it. We sow the seed of the word when we teach it to our children at home. We sow the seed of the word when we preach it from the front in church on Sundays or when we gather during the week in community groups and study the word together. We sow the seed when we sit down with someone who doesn't understand or believe in God or care about Jesus Christ. We sow the seed when we sit down with them one-to-one and we explain the message to them. We sow the seed when we take it into schools, on to university campuses, into care homes or cafes or sports clubs. We sow the seed. And we sow the seed when we support ministries and missions that spread the word of God to places that we can never reach. And here's the thing, the teacher is saying to us, we just don't know what will succeed, whether this or that or the other thing. We don't know. And so the hard work has got to be done of sowing the seed, of spreading it well, of spreading it widely, and then leaving the results with God.

[23 : 01] The Apostle Paul says this, he says, remember this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. And so Paul's saying we need to seize the day.

Whatever the conditions, even if there is uncertainty about the future, most probably is, even if there is inevitability about life right now in this world, which there is, he's saying whatever the conditions, there is no more opportune time than now. Seize the day to live our lives, investing them in God and his service. Because there would be little success in reaping if there is no effort in sowing. And so, as we conclude, this text here in Ecclesiastes 11 really is a challenge to us all, whether we would call ourselves a Christian or not. Because the teacher is forcing us to ask, how do I stop wasting my life? Because there is an uncertainty in life and there is an inevitability in life. So he is urging us to seize the day by using the sowing and reaping metaphor.

Because it does matter how we live. It really does. So listen to the Apostle Paul again in Galatians chapter 6. He says, do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh from the flesh will reap destruction. Whoever sows to please the Spirit from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good. For at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. What's he saying? He's saying you can't mock God. God will not be mocked. He's saying we will reap what we sow with our lives. It will either be destruction or it will be eternal life. And so if you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, then I hope you can see that there is an urgency in responding to God.

Because we must do it now, while there is still time and while there is still opportunity today. And so don't waste your life by failing to acknowledge the God who made you. You owe your life to Him. And that's why Jesus Christ demands when He calls people to Himself, He demands that we lose our life for Him and for the Gospel so that we save it. But of course, Jesus doesn't just tell us to do what He wasn't prepared to do Himself. Because through His life and death, Jesus ultimately fulfills what Ecclesiastes is teaching us. Jesus said in John chapter 12, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. So Jesus was speaking about the principle of life through death, using the analogy of seed. But more significantly, Jesus was talking about His own death, His death on a cross, and His own burial in the ground like a seed, and then His resurrection from the dead. And so the good news of Christianity is that Jesus sowed His life when

[26 : 26] He gave it up to die on a cross for our sins so He could give us new life. And so the ultimate harvest is made up of all those people who turn to Jesus in repentance and faith, who don't mock God, but turn away from their sin and turn to Jesus Christ. Because Jesus is the Lord of the harvest. And so He sends us out when we know Him as His workers in His harvest field. And so our job as Christians or as the church is to sow the seed of the Word of God, the good news about Jesus. And so our response to God's grace towards us should be a generous giving of our time, our talents, and our treasure for the advance of God's kingdom in this world. Because if Jesus came to give His life for us, and so gives us life to the full, eternal, now and eternal life to come, then we have got nothing to lose by investing our lives in Him.

And so let's seize the day by working for Him now, and leaving the results with Him, and waiting, waiting for the day when He will gather His harvest in. Let's pray. Thank you, our God, for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, into this world so that we might know you for ourselves. We thank you for this seed that is the Word of God, the good news about Jesus Christ. We thank you for His death and burial and resurrection and all that that means for us right now, life in all its fullness, and eternal life to come.

And so help us not to waste our lives in this world, whether we call ourselves a Christian or not, not to waste our lives by storing up treasures for this life that will do us no good in the end, but help us to invest our life well in you and in your work. Store up treasures that last forever.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.