

Teach Us, Qohelet (Part 19)

Ecclesiastes 11:1-10

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As we heard the testimony of those who were baptized, we are reminded that their lives are in God's hands. Whether they were raised in church or came to know Jesus as adults, it was God's plan that they were baptized here today. There is so much in this life that we can't control, but there is comfort in knowing God is in control. In Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, *Qohelet* reminds us that there is much we can't control. Four times in vv. 2, 5, and 6 he mentions the fact that we don't know or don't understand. We prayed for rain to clear the air and stop the fires, but only God could provide the rain. And when a tree falls in the forest, we can't control which direction it falls (v. 3). Our relationship with God must be based on recognition of our own inability. For those who do not know God, realizing that they are not in control can be frightening. Our culture values pulling yourself up by your bootstraps and working hard for everything you have. But this attitude is counter to the gospel message. We must acknowledge that we can't do it on our own and that we need God's help, because it's only through Jesus that we can have forgiveness. Accepting our inability is a crucial part of the gospel message, and it is this point that *Qohelet* emphasizes here.

So what is our response? The temptation is to be idle, either because we are complacently waiting for God to do everything for us, or because we are paralyzed with worry about what He may bring. However, God has not left everything out of our control. The world is not completely orderly, but also not completely unpredictable. There still is some cause and effect that enables us to play a role in the outcome of events. Thus although God is in control, we still have a responsibility to do our part. Since the fall of man, the lot of humanity was to toil to meet our daily needs, and we should do it diligently and prudently. *Qohelet* mentions reaping and sowing in vv. 4, 6 and shipping grain and diversifying investments in vv. 1-2. It is only in our power to work diligently, and act prudently to mitigate some risk. This is the part we must play. But whether the crops yield a good harvest or a disaster strikes is all in God's hands. We must trust in God, and not let the fear of disaster prevent us from doing our part.

In vv. 7-10, *Qohelet* both encourages and warns those who are young. In today's culture, the youth are encouraged to enjoy life and experience everything they dream of. In vv. 7-9 *Qohelet* also encourages the young to enjoy life. As he has said many times before, in this life we

should enjoy the fruit of our toil. However, he warns us to remember the days of darkness and know that God will bring all things to judgment. *Qohelet* says there is much we can't know, but we know for sure that judgment awaits. We have responsibility and toil in this life, for which among our other deeds we will be held accountable. We shouldn't orient our entire lives to our own pleasure and complacently neglect our responsibility, because fleeting pleasures do not ultimately satisfy, and laziness soon leads to unnecessary suffering. Yet we should also not anxiously focus our entire lives on work, because no amount of work or even success can guarantee peace, we will not be able to enjoy what God has provided. There is wisdom in finding a balance between enjoyment and responsibility, between relying on God alone and diligently performing the work we are given. We should not be idle and complacent, but also not be anxiously trying to control what we cannot control. But as we balance work and enjoyment, the most important thing is to remember God, who is in control, and to have a trusting relationship with Him.

In v. 10, *Qohelet* tells us to banish anxiety about what we can't control. The reason we can banish anxiety is because all things are in God's hands (v. 5). When we earnestly pray to God about the health of our brothers, we must know that He cares about them more than we could ever care. He demonstrated this through the sacrifice of His Son. So trust in Him. As Jesus said, don't worry about tomorrow. Do what you need to do, and trust God with the outcome. Our relationship with God doesn't only have benefits in eternity, but also in this life. So be diligent, but trust in Him. Even if misfortunes and trials come, and things don't turn out the way we would like, know that God is in control and He has a plan for us. As Reinhold Niebuhr once prayed, "God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things which should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." In wisdom let us do our part, but in all things trust in the Maker of all things.