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## 'You never know':

# The Message of Ecclesiastes 11:1-6

by T. Francis Glasson

*Dr Glasson is a distinguished New Testament scholar who taught at New College, University of London, before his retirement. Here he explores a little-known area of the Old Testament and shares some interesting discoveries with his readers.*

Four times over in this passage the phrase 'thou knowest not' occurs; in modern parlance this may be rendered 'you never know'. But before we look at these instances, the first verse demands attention, with its rather intriguing reference to casting bread on the waters and finding it after many days.

This has been variously interpreted. A literal meaning is difficult; one follows this practice when feeding swans or goldfish but in these cases the bread never returns!

1. A reference to trade has been suggested. This is the line taken by the NEB: 'send your grain across the seas and in time you will get a return', and earlier by Moffatt: 'Trust your goods far and wide at sea, till you get good returns after a while.'

Renan's rendering last century was similar: 'Lance hardiment ta fortune en haute mer; avec le temps, tu la retrouveras agrandie.'<sup>1</sup>

2. Others suggest that bread can mean bread-corn and thus emerges the idea of sowing, which would suit the context. It has been pointed out that Egyptians cast seed into the moist alluvium of the Nile.

3. Attention has also been called to a current proverb which declared that to give to a mean man was as useless as sowing in the sea. The New Zealand scholar H. R. Ranston (who incidentally was originally a student of A. S. Peake at Manchester) has instanced a proverbial saying of Theognis (pp. 101ff.):

Tis the vainest thanks one gets who benefits the mean, equal to sowing the water of the grey sea; for neither by sowing the waters would you reap a good crop, nor by benefiting the base would you secure benefit in return.<sup>2</sup>

'Koheleth', says Ranston, 'has probably in mind the short-sighted exhortation of the gnomic author, and is deliberately controverting it; even on the thankless waters scatter broadcast the seeds of kindness; be sure that sooner or latter you will be rewarded.' At the period when Ecclesiastes was written there is reason to believe that a certain amount of Greek culture had penetrated into the thinking of the Jewish people.<sup>3</sup> One difficulty, however, is this; Theognis explains his imagery clearly;

<sup>1</sup> *L'Ecclesiaste* (p. 140 in the 1928 re-print).

<sup>2</sup> *Ecclesiastes and the Early Greek Wisdom Literature*, London, 1925, 101ff.

<sup>3</sup> On the general question see my book, *Greek Influence in Jewish Eschatology*, London, 1961.

could a reader of Ecclesiastes be expected to recognise the allusion without any accompanying hint? Perhaps he could, if the gnomic saying had passed into general use.

In this connection it is interesting to note that a Jewish writing of Alexandria, the Letter of Aristeas, has a series of parallels with a popular work, The Pseudo-Phocylidea, which contains Greek as well as Jewish teaching. Prof. J. J. Lewis, another New Zealand scholar, has set out the parallels, and it will be seen that in one instance there is not a parallel but a contrast, in fact a direct contradiction. While Pseudo-Phocylidea 152 says 'Do not do good to an evil man: *it is equal to sowing in the sea*', the Letter of Aristeas enjoins generosity to all men, even to 'those who think differently from us, in order that by this means we may win them over to the right' (226:7). Is it not possible that at an earlier time, Ecclesiastes also was countering the same selfish advice and saying in effect, it is worth while to do what looks quite useless and foolish, to sow in the sea?

44      Whichever interpretation we adopt of the opening words of Ecclesiastes 11:1 the general idea is clear, that the results of our action will surely emerge if we have the patience to wait until 'after many days'.

The whole passage (11:1-6) has been described as "a call to venture". There is no place for indecision and lack of enterprise.<sup>5</sup> The writer is urging us to apply the principles of the farmer and the merchant to the affairs of daily life and to wider issues. And there is justification for applying this to the sphere of Christian witness; here too we need the spirit of venture, of hope and faith, the conviction that in due season we shall reap if we faint not, even if it is only "after many days" that the full returns appear. We must sow at all times and even in the most unlikely places with a kind of reckless optimism, not waiting for ideal conditions.

These verses have been turned to poetry by James Montgomery in his hymn,

Sow in the morn thy seed,  
At eve hold not thine hand.

With additional touches from Isaiah 32:20 (Blessed are they that sow beside all waters) and the parable of the Sower, he shows how the passage may be read in Christian light to bring a message of encouragement to those who sow the good seed of the word of God.

'*Thou knowest not* what evil shall be upon the earth', says verse 2; the same phrase occurs twice in verse 5, '*As thou knowest not* what is the

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<sup>4</sup> 'The Table-Talk Section in the Letter of Aristeas', NTS 13, 1966-67, 53-56.

<sup>5</sup> E. T. Ryder, in *Peake's Commentary* (1962), 466.

way of the wind, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child; even so *thou knowest not* the work of God who doeth all'. (Incidentally the linking of 'the way of the wind' with birth from the womb, is found again in John 3:4-8). Then verse 6 continues: 'In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for *thou knowest not* which shall prosper whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.'

This last verse reminds us that on the surface there is something chancy and unpredictable about the sowing of seed. Sometimes a gardener will point to a plot over which he has toiled diligently and yet it has come to nothing. But in another corner he will show you a plant that was pushed in on the off-chance and given no further thought; and yet it took root and flourished. Is it not similar in our Christian witness? 'The wind bloweth where it listeth . . .'

Without trying to match the four occurrences of the phrase with any exactness, I find in this passage a number of pertinent reminders. (1). You never know what may happen in unlikely places; (2). you never know what may happen at odd times and even in unfavourable seasons; (3). you never know what may emerge 'after many days'; and (4). you never know what God is doing through your service, whether in preaching the Word or teaching the young or in personal testimony and influence. We must sow everywhere, in the unlikeliest places:

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Beside all waters sow,  
The highway furrows stock,  
Drop it where thorns and thistles grow,  
Scatter it on the rock.

How ridiculous this seems at first sight, sowing on the rock and among thistles, as absurd as 'upon the waters' — but you never know. The most unlikely places can yield a harvest. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth, they asked scornfully. Yet there once lived a Carpenter at Nazareth who made quite a stir in the world.

I remember taking a journey through a very quiet part of England, a countryside where 'nothing important ever happens', away from the busy highways. But on that single journey I passed places associated with Wm. Carey, Wm. Cowper, John Newton and John Bunyan. Think what those four men have contributed to the spiritual life of the whole world. If God has set you in an obscure spot, you never know what may ultimately spring from some life you will touch; and quite apart from that every soul is of infinite value in His sight.

Morning and evening, says verse 6; the Christian is never off duty, for 'you do not know which will prosper, this or that.' And notice too verse 4

with its reminder that we must scatter the seed even in unseasonable times, not waiting for ideal conditions. If a farmer waited until the weather was exactly right, he would spend much of his time in idleness; he must make the best of the weather that comes, for 'he that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap.' The Living Bible renders: 'If you wait for perfect conditions, you will never get anything done.' The times are dismal enough in the 80s but we must go forward with hope and expectancy. We must emulate Sir Richard Shirley of the 17th century, who 'did the best things in the worst times'. When Europe was seething with revolution, Carey proclaimed his message, 'Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.' A dispirited preacher unburdened himself to Spurgeon, who said to him, 'But you don't expect conversions every time you preach?' — 'Of course not', was the reply. — 'And that's why you never get any!'

'After many days', says this passage. Countless examples could be given of tremendous results coming to light long afterwards, sometimes decades after the original seed-sowing.

46 But the most important factor is mentioned in verse 5: 'thou knowest not *the work of God*'. This phrase is often used in Methodist circles, and some take it to refer to our work for God. But the meaning is rather what God is doing, unseen and silently like the forces which mature the grain. Our work for God would be futile apart from the fact that behind our feeble efforts and poor presentation, the Spirit of God is at work. According to John 15:26-7 the witness of the disciple is accompanied by that of the Paraclete. So in Acts 5:32, 'We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit.'

As hinted above, many instances could be cited to enforce the principles outlined; but I would like to take one striking example which illustrates all of them — an obscure spot, an unpropitious time, an immensely important sequel emerging 'after many days', and the evident hand of God behind it all.

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Two hundred years ago a weather-beaten traveller on horse-back, neatly dressed in black, might have been seen riding west along the roads of central Ireland. The roads were rough but on he went amidst bleak prospects and fair, passing loughs and bogs in all weathers. Had one of his English friends seen him he might have stopped him and asked, 'Why, John Wesley! whatever are you doing here in these lonely regions. A few years ago you were a don at Oxford, living in those lovely

rooms at Lincoln College overlooking the delightful lawn; you could have stayed there all your days. What mad adventure is this? Here you are, pelted by the rain, and when you reach a village or a town, as likely as not they will pelt you with stones and mud. What fool's errand has brought you here?

But something had happened to John Wesley. He had answered the call of God; and when he heard of people who needed the Gospel he felt a responsibility for them. He believed in direct action, and when he knew of men and women who hadn't heard of the love of God in Christ he thought the best course was not to convene a commission but to board a ship, buy a horse and go to them.

This was how he spent 50 years of his life. All over England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland were these little groups of men and women whom he hammered into shape. He visited them regularly, knew their names and their spiritual progress; urged them to tell others about Jesus, to press on to a life of perfect love, and to do all the good they could. There is nothing quite like this in the history of the world.

And so we find him crossing to Ireland 21 times, not just to Dublin, but around the island and across it. On this particular occasion he is making his way to Ballingrane, a place few British people have heard of. You would need a good map to find its name. It is not far from Limerick in the south west, where numbers of German Palatinates had settled. Some members of this community had responded to Wesley's message, and one small society gathered at Ballingrane. Now, before we go further, let me mention that there are about ten million Methodists in the U.S.A.; and if you ask them how Methodism began in America they will probably say, 'Haven't you heard of Philip Embury from Ballingrane?'

A group of these people emigrated to New York and among them were Embury and his cousin Barbara. After a few months of silence he began to hold services in his home. Then they moved to a room near the barracks, then to a rigging-loft, and soon they built a church. By this time they had been joined by the picturesque Captain Webb, with his red uniform and green eye-shade — he had recently been wounded at the battle of Quebec.

Meanwhile to the south another Methodist from Ireland named Strawbridge had begun his witness in Maryland: another off-shoot of Wesley's Irish work. Hundreds responded and these two streams met. They sent a message to Wesley, 'Can you send us some preachers?' And over the years he sent a number of young men, some of them in their twenties. One of them (Shadford) received this letter from Wesley as he was leaving England:

I let you loose, George, on the great continent of America; publish your message in the open face of the sun and do all the good you can.

The greatest of them all was Francis Asbury who travelled on horseback as far as from here to the moon. As the population spread westwards the circuit riders were with them.

In a sense this has grown from the seed sown at Ballingrane. When I was in California some years ago, sharing in a small way in the vigorous church life there, I visited the great University of Southern California. On the campus is the Bovard Tower, and at the top there is a stone carving of John Wesley; for this university like many educational and medical institutions in America has Methodist roots. You can trace the links from Ballingrane to New York; from New York to Los Angeles in the far West.

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Wesley never knew the full story of his work in this obscure Irish village and its harvest across the seas. Perhaps at first he felt some disappointment to find that the little society had broken up and its principal members had emigrated. But his whole life was inspired by the conviction that behind all his endeavours there was 'the work of God who doeth all'. I am not suggesting for a moment that Wesley's work at Ballingrane was worth while just because of its spectacular sequel. Wesley loved the members of this little group for their own sake; his journeys and endeavours were justified if at last 'Christ was formed in them'. But how strange are the ways of God! As an undesigned by-product of his efforts to foster the spiritual life of a small group of humble people, there has come after many days an abundant harvest.

Those who feel dispirited, wondering if their work is worth while should ponder the words, 'you never know'. It may not be until 'after many days' that you will begin to see the way God has been leading you and using you. As Kierkegaard said, we have to live our lives forwards but we understand them backwards. Go forth, then, bearing the seed and though at times you have to do so weeping, you will come again with joy, bringing the sheaves with you; for they that sow in tears shall reap in joy.