

November 7, 2021



BEING HUMAN

THE WISDOM OF ECCLESIASTES FOR TODAY

study guide : part five





Being Human?

Mind : How Not to be *Fortune Tellers*

By David Fields

Being Human | The Wisdom of Ecclesiastes | Mind (How Not to be Fortune Tellers) Part 5

I. When Life Is “Unfair”

“There is something else meaningless [or, as we’ve seen, this word means ‘vaporous’ – something we can’t get our hands, or heads around] that occurs on earth: the righteous who get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked who get what the righteous deserve.”

-Ecclesiastes 8:14

“In some measure we can understand how the world works, but why...do people you know and love die young or suffer long-term ill health while the dictator lives in prosperity into his old age?...Or consider...[w]e can pour our whole life into something, and it might succeed, or it might fail.” – David Gibson, *Living Life Backwards: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*.

II. Observations on the Text: Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

1. “Under the sun”: Refers to life in this present world and is synonymous with “under heaven” or “on the earth.” To be human is to be bound to a set of limitations – *human* limitations

2. One of those limitations is in our ability to know and predict the outcomes of our decisions with *certainty*. There are no certainties, no firm guarantees. “The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong, or food to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant...”.
3. The reason there are no guarantees: “Time and chance happen to them all”

How can there be chance in the world if God is sovereign? Through this text God tells us that chance is a *factor* in the way he designed the world.

“The fastest runner in the Olympic Games and a “sure bet” for the title is tripped in the course of the race and falls. One of the least favored horses in the British Grand National wins because of an unprecedented and chaotic mess at one of the fences, which put many other horses out of the race. One of the best-trained and mightiest armies in the world fails to win a guerrilla war, despite confident predictions. Highly qualified and educated people end up in poverty, hunger, and dishonor.” – *Iain Provan*



God's sovereignty doesn't mean he manipulates every single detail of the world. It means that God is ultimately the One who reigns over his good creation and will lead it where he intends, and in his own way. So, God is free to allow *chance* to be part of the world he sovereignly designed. There is mystery here.

"All this counterbalances the impression we may get from maxims about hard work, that success is ours to command. In the sea of life, we are more the fish...taken in an evil net, or else unaccountably spared, than masters of our fate and the captains of our souls."

- Derek Kidner, *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*

III. On Living Without Certainty

1. Nobody, no matter how wise, can evade 'time and chance'

Ecclesiastes 8:16 says, you cannot figure out "all that God has done", can't predict the future, can't 'beat the system'. You can't live outside the limits of how God created the *cosmos* to work.

"For beyond cause and effect there is God, who will not allow the idolatry of the self ultimately to exist. The God of order, therefore, brings chaos to life, so as to remind us that we are not in fact gods who control the present or the future. Instead, we are mortals in need of repentance in dust and ashes. Every time a prediction fails, every time the swift do not win a race and the strong a battle, every time our health breaks down, or we find ourselves poorer rather than richer, or we discover we are miserable rather than happy—every such occasion is a moment of grace and an opportunity to look reality straight in the eye. It is a moment in which we are helped to remember who controls the times."

- Iain Provan

Response 1: Radical, Joyful Trust

"We will not be inclined to trust God with what we don't know if we don't have a relationship with God."

- Jill Enns

*"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. **In all your ways submit to him**, and he will make your paths straight."*

- Proverbs 3:5

Paul says that's something we can and do know: "For **we know** that in all things [good things, and bad – and things we can't possibly understand] God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

– Romans 8:28

"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son..."

– Romans 8:29a

Why trust God?

Jesus walks the darkest path possible, let's his life collapse; be pulled apart under the weight of our rebellion, and yet, he is victorious, comes out the other side – in order that we might be restored to our full humanity in him. He knows the darkness more than any of us, and promises, ultimately to guide us through our death as well, to a future with him forever. When you know that – know *Him* – you don't need certainty. You need *Him*. "In Christ alone, my hope is found." And it really is.

2. This Word Against "Certain Outcomes" addresses False Thinking about God

We might be tempted to think that if we don't get what we expected from life, that if we suffer, experience life as 'unfair', that means we can't trust God – or that maybe God isn't even there.

We are wrong to think that if we live with 'wisdom', or goodness, or "great faith" that God will make life smooth and easy; that he somehow must keep up 'his end of the bargain.' Like, God will owe us comfort or ease or good health.

If that's our view, it shows us is that instead of actually *wanting* God as our God – and trusting him, what we are really after is not God but only what God gives.

"To believe this [the so-called "prosperity gospel"] is to believe something profoundly unbiblical; to teach it is to insult every Christian throughout the past two thousand years who has known illness, poverty, and



misery; and to press it on the sick, the poor, and the unhappy of the present day is to place a millstone around the neck of those who are drowning, rather than offering them the comfort and hope of the gospel.

– Iain Provan

Response 2: Live in and Offer the True Hope of the True Gospel. Jesus is *with us* in misery as well as happiness in sickness as well as in health. Our hope is that he will, one day, wipe away every tear at his return. That's what we *know*. That because Jesus was raised, all who hope in him will be as well. And so we can live with hope even in the darkest places.

3. We don't know which of our endeavours will succeed or fail, so work with gladness still Ecclesiastes 11:5-6

A. Approach your work with humility

"Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil."

– James 4:13-15

B. Acknowledge that we can't control the ultimate outcomes of our work, so we work hard, and entrust the results to God.

Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might...".

"My good God, Father, and Savior, grant me aid by your Holy Spirit to now work fruitfully in my vocation, which is from you, all in order to love you and the people around me rather than for my own gain and glory. Give me wisdom, judgment and prudence, and freedom from my besetting sins. Bring me under the rule of true humility. Let me accept with patience whatever amount of fruitfulness or difficulty in my work that you give me this day. And in all I do, help me to rest always in my Lord Jesus Christ and in his grace alone for my salvation and life Hear me, merciful Father, by our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen."

- John Calvin, 16th Century Pastor

C. Carry our hopes of success with open-handedness before God, and a sense of generosity toward others

The pull of our hearts, however, is to grasp for certainty – to aspire to god-like control so we can experience a sense of self-fulfillment. This is the same pattern of 'grasping' that we see with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

If we make health or fitness or beauty our 'greatest good', then we will be willing to treat those who stand in our way of these things as objects to be conquered rather than people to be loved – and the cycle of dehumanization spirals further.

Speaking of the pressures toward pursuing personal fulfillment in our present culture, Iain Provan says:

"We are invited to pursue the body beautiful, to take control of our personal health and fitness, to invent our own value and belief systems, all with a view to gaining personal fulfillment. We are given ever-increasing permission to ignore –and if necessary to dispense with—whatever and whoever stands in our way in this quest, be it life in the womb, children, spouses, the poor, foreigners, or the aged."

– Iain Provan

Response 3: Live with Generosity Toward Others

Jesus, in Luke 12:16-21, is helping shake us free – to reorient our hearts toward richness to God. We were made to love God, to love others, to take care of God's world – this is richness toward God. This is life as God intends.





Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open Up: Are there areas of your life that you are particularly tempted to seek “certainty”? What are they? Why do you ‘want to know’ in these areas?

Read Ecclesiastes 9:11-12

1. In v.11 the Teacher points to four ways that challenge our common assumptions about expectations. What are they? How have you seen that to be the case in your experience?
2. How does that challenge or encourage you? Why?
3. In his message, Pastor Dave pointed out how “under the sun” means living within the bounds of our God-given human limitations. And one of those limitations is that we cannot live with ‘certain answers’ in many cases. How might that be a gift from God? (Consider the quote from Iain Provan’s commentary below)

“For beyond cause and effect there is God, who will not allow the idolatry of the self ultimately to exist. The God of order, therefore, brings chaos to life, so as to remind us that we are not in fact gods who control the present or the future. Instead, we are mortals in need of repentance in dust and ashes. Every time a prediction fails, every time the swift do not win a race and the strong a battle, every time our health breaks down, or we find ourselves poorer rather than richer, or we discover we are miserable rather than happy—every such occasion is a moment of grace and an opportunity to look reality straight in the eye. It is a moment in which we are helped to remember who controls the times.” - Iain Provan

4. There are several ways we might respond to uncertainty. One is to keep insisting on certainty – to try and beat the system. Another is to close ourselves off from larger meaning and create a meaning for ourselves based on what we know (as postmodern philosopher Albert Camus teaches). Both are arrogant, for they assume to know more than God does. Read what the Teacher offers in **Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**. How does that lead us to live even with uncertainty?

5. We can live with “trusting action” – whereby we are not paralyzed by the lack of knowledge we have, but can make the best decisions possible, with the best information possible, but ultimately leave the results with God.

How do you find that freeing?

How could you practice that this week?

(Read Proverbs 3:5 as a basis for discussion).

Prayer: Take time to share the areas of your life where you might be longing for certainty by are looking for deeper trust in God. Lift up those prayers for each other. Give thanks to God for the gift of limitations, for they cause us to lean on him.

