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WHEN A TREE FALLS IN THE FOREST…

Ecclesiastes 11

A recent issue of *Wired* magazine contained an article by Zak Jason, journalist and researcher, that at first surprised me. He wrote about a Florida Marlins baseball player named Oreo Queefs, who set the baseball world on fire back in 2003 and 2004. Jason related how Queefs broke the record for stolen bases in a season, by a lot, hit a record setting number of home runs, and had an unheard of and seemingly impossible batting average of .680. Then after 2 years he just disappeared. Jason wrote that he had recently received a text from the Marlins manager at the time, who said Queefs had fallen on hard times. He now lives with his uncle in a rented trailer in Nevada, where the two of them run a failing sausage stand called Queefs’ Kielbasa Kiosk. He is twice divorced and is on probation after an attempted robbery of a bait and tackle shop.

I thought this had to be a joke. No one has ever hit anything close to .680, and I’ve never heard of Oreo Queefs. But the article went on to clear up why I had never heard of him. Queefs only existed in a PlayStation 2 video game. The aforementioned Marlins manager was Jason’s childhood friend Chris. When Jason and Chris were 13 they created Queefs using the game’s Create A Player function. Jason said, “I haven’t played any of these games in a decade, but over the years my friends and I have updated one another on the lives of our created characters. They’ve all plummeted from glory…As kids, we lived our dreams vicariously through video game characters and their record shattering successes. As adults, we process our own real setbacks and failures through their imagined setbacks and failures. He says the reality of life for him and his friends has involved layoffs, anxieties, illnesses, divorce, fertility issues and many other disappointments. Life hasn’t gone the way they dreamed it would. That’s a familiar story. The imaginary downfall of Oreo Queefs was more dramatic that most of us have endured. His travails, however, reflect the travails his creators have had to deal with as adults, and maybe remind us a bit of our own.

Most of us are all too familiar with disappointment. How should we respond to life and its many unexpected bumps in the road? Ecclesiastes 11 helps us. No one wants life to be one long slog through hardship, disappointment and frustration. Then we read in the Bible that followers of Jesus should not just overcome in this life, but overwhelmingly conquer. Given the uncertainty of life that we have seen in this book, how can we make the most of life when it can be so hard?

SOW YOUR SEED ANYWAY

This passage contains statements that are ambiguous and open to lots of interpretation, as well as some that are puzzling, at best. The puzzles start with the first verse. The NIV translation, “Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return,” seems fairly straightforward, but is heavily interpreted rather than just translated. It tells you what the translators thought it means rather than just what the words literally say. In this case, I think they didn’t get it quite right. The Hebrew text literally says, “Send out your bread on the surface of the waters, for in many days you will find it.” The translators took that to be business advice. The translators continued that theme in verse 2 when they gave us, “Invest in seven ventures; yes, in eight; you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.” So more business advice, in this case having to do with investing. Essentially they thought this meant diversify your portfolio. But verse 2 literally says, “Give a share to seven or even eight, for you do not know what evil may be on the earth.” What these verses mean is not at all certain.

Then you get to verse 3 and it gets really strange. “If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or the north, in the place where it falls, there it will lie.” If clouds are full of water, they drop rain. Thanks for the news flash, Captain Obvious. What is that supposed to tell us, other than the fact that the clouds we often get here apparently aren’t full of water? Then there’s that statement about a tree lying where it falls. Doesn’t that sound like a “Well duh” comment? It is reminiscent of the old, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it,” question, but this is different. I don’t think a tree would fall and say, “I don’t think I like this spot. I’m going to move over there because it looks better.” Where a tree falls, there it lies. Do you think God thought this piece of news was so important he had to record it for all time?

Oh, wait, I know. Is this like one of those Eastern, “Ah, grasshopper” kind of sayings? It means something really deep and kind of new age-y, right? Maybe it’s a koan. Like when one master was asked, “What is the way?” he answered, “An open eyed man falling into a well.” What? Is this like that?

Verse 5 gives us a key to this passage. It says, “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.” We know a lot more about the path of the wind today than Solomon did in his day. We know tons more about how a baby is formed in a mother’s womb. But at the end of the day, much of that is still a mystery. We don’t know why or how some things happen. Having our daughter and daughter in law go through high risk pregnancies taught us that there is a tremendous amount that we just don’t know about how and why a baby is formed and born. That’s because we cannot understand the work of God.

If I were to sum up verse 3, I’d say it means, “things happen and we don’t know why.” Clouds come over and dump rain on us, trees fall in the forest, sometimes to the south, sometimes to the north. We don’t know why. Things happen in this world that at times seem random. We don’t control them and we don’t always know why they happen the way they do. In other words, we can’t always predict how things are going to turn out and we surely can’t control what happens.

This leads to verse 4. “Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.” You can get paralyzed by trying to figure out what’s the best time and the best way to do something. Because we can’t always understand the work of God, we can’t be certain that what we are doing will succeed. We don’t know the right time or the right way to do something. If we wait until we have all that nailed down, we will never do anything.

The application that comes from all of this is in verse 6. “Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening do not let your hands be idle.” In other words, don’t get paralyzed by the uncertainty. Don’t let fear lock you up and keep you from acting. Make a decision, then give it your best. Come up with the best plan you can, then act. Sow your seed. Work hard and then leave the results to God. This is because in the end, “You do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well.” You can’t know for certain what the best decision is, so make your call and then go to work. If we insist on being certain of the outcome, and on conditions being perfect before we act, we will never do anything.

This begins to give us a sense of what was going on in verses 1-2. The expression, “Throw your bread on the water” was actually an ancient figure of speech that described extravagance. The idea was, go ahead, take the risk, do your best, even if it might seem crazy, maybe it will all turn out well. Verse 2 continues the theme and says, “Disasters may come. They do happen. But sow your seed widely. Don’t be intimidated by the possibility that disasters might happen. Yes, they will occur, so protect yourself as much as possible, but take the risk and move ahead.”

A number of years ago Laurie and I had an older car that was having mechanical problems. We had to pay for one expensive repair, then another a few months later, then not all that long after that we faced yet another one. At that point we struggled with whether we ought to buy a new car instead of putting any more money into our old clunker. We gagged at the price of buying another car. We didn’t think we could afford it. We knew that generally the cheaper way to go is to pay for repairs on an old car than to buy a new one. On the other hand, there’s a point at which you don’t feel like you can rely on the old bucket of bolts. I didn’t know what was the wisest thing to do. Finally we decided to go with the most conservative option and paid for the repairs. Two weeks later the car had another major problem. Our mechanic said, “I don’t want to tell you what to do, but if this were my car, I wouldn’t put another dime in it.” We didn’t. We got another car, and I beat myself up. I thought of all the money we flushed down that hole trying to keep the car running. Trying to save money we threw a bunch of money away. That’s kind of the problem in this life. You don’t always know how it’s going to turn out.

I’m terrible at making decisions. I tend to see all the bad things that can happen with every possible course of action being considered. That can cause me to get stuck. I watch the wind and don’t plant. It helps me to think back on that car episode. Yes, it blew up in my face and cost us money. But what helps me is to think about how important that ended up being. It didn’t matter at all. Nothing truly important was at stake there. It didn’t affect our family, our relationships, our ministry or anything of significance. In the end, the episode hasn’t even had an appreciable effect on our finances. Yes, in the immediate time frame it was frustrating. But in the end it didn’t really change anything. It proved to be no big deal, a waste of emotional energy. This passage tells us to throw our bread on the water, plant our seed in the morning. Stop worrying about things you can’t control, just do your best and trust God. It is helpful to remember that no matter what you do, there is risk involved. There is risk even in doing nothing. So don’t be intimidated or paralyzed by the risk. Make your choice then go at it with all your might. This passage actually frees us up a lot. You’ll never have all the answers, no plan is perfect, and no matter what you do, you don’t control the outcome. So make the best decision you can, then plant your seed. Get on with life.

ENJOY YOUR DAYS

Verse 8 says, “However many years anyone may live, let them enjoy them all.” There are two things that strike me about this. First is that God wants us to enjoy our lives. This is consistent with 1 Timothy 4:3-4. In verse 1 Paul warned against people who abandon the faith and teach “things taught by demons.” Wow, that sounds spooky. What are these terrible satanic doctrines? Verse 3 says, “They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving.” In other words, they are always saying no to everything. They say life is only about discipline and asceticism. Paul said in verse 4, “Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.” God has given us good and he wants us to enjoy it and be thankful for it.

So enjoying life is a good thing. God wants it for us. The other thing I note about that verse is God wants us to enjoy **all** the years we have, not just some of them. Hey, some years are better than others, right? Would anyone want to repeat 2020? Yet this verse says however many years we have, we should enjoy all of them. This suggests to me that we should make a deliberate choice to make the best out of whatever situation we might have on any given day. We should look for the good and be thankful for what we have. That might sound a bit Pollyanna, but there is great wisdom in it and it is something we can actually choose to do.

What is your alternative? It is to indulge in self pity and feel sorry for yourself, or to be eaten up with envy because someone else has it better than you. Or you can choose to complain because everything is not to your satisfaction. How full will your life be if you are feeling sorry for yourself, eaten up with envy, or complaining?

Remember that Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:16 that we should be “making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.” Every day of our lives will present us with a myriad of opportunities. Paul says we should make the most of every single one of them. Enjoy them, find the good in them, give thanks for them, learn from them, do your best at whatever you are doing with each one of them.

Of course, for me, number one on the list of opportunities I should make the most of is enjoying life with Laurie. Pretty much every day with her provides reason to laugh and enjoy life. The day before Thanksgiving we went to the grocery store to pick up a few items we needed for the next day. To no one’s surprise, it was very busy at the store. I was taking our items out of the cart and putting them on the checkout stand when Laurie said, “Oh no, I forgot sour cream! Do you think I have time to go back and get some before we check out?” It was dubious because the clerk was just starting to check our items. I said, “Well, probably not, but you can try.” Laurie took off running to get the sour cream at the back of the store. They got our groceries all checked and she hadn’t made it back. There was a long line of people at the check out stand, so I couldn’t say, “Can you wait for my wife to get back with one more item?” I was just about to pay when Laurie arrived back at the end of that long line. She made like she was going to throw that container of sour cream to me over all those people. Thinking that was pretty funny I started to laugh along with the bagger until I realized she wasn’t pretending. She fired that thing toward me. It sailed over 5 or 6 people, some of whom were ducking, fearing they were about to get conked by sour cream, but it was a perfect pass. I didn’t have to move at all, just put my hands up and caught the thing, then I calmly handed it to the surprised checker like we do stuff like this every day. There were a few chuckles. I commented, “Life with my wife is never boring.” The clerk said, “Apparently not.”

I’m fortunate, being married to Laurie. But there are so many ways to make the most of the opportunities we have. It is taking in the beauty of another day alive. It is reveling in the wonderful place we live. It is enjoying the people around us and doing everything we can to love them and let them know how thankful we are for them, that we want them to know how special they are to us.

LIVE WITH JOY

Verses 9-10 address the young and tell them to be happy, to let their hearts give them joy. I wonder what Solomon’s message is to those who aren’t young? This is of interest to me since I definitely find myself in the camp of those who are getting uncomfortably close to their sell by date. What, exactly, are you saying to those who are, say, chronologically gifted, Solomon? Are you just saying, “Hey, tough rutabagas, Grampa. No joy for you,” and ignoring them? Is the message to us more experienced veterans that we are irrelevant? They don’t matter so just put them out to pasture?

No, I think Solomon would say that these words would apply to anyone, young or old, but that some of what he says is particularly important to the young. He tells them to “follow the ways of your heart” in verse 9. Seasoned gray hairs mostly don’t need that. They’re not trying to figure out what to do with themselves, which way to go in life. They’ve fought that battle a long time ago. But we all need to hear that we should “be happy” and let our heart give us joy.

Yes, but how do we do that? We looked at joy a few weeks ago in our study of this book. One of the ideas we saw there was that we must choose joy. The Bible repeatedly commands us to be joyful, meaning that is within our ability to obey or disobey. We can decide to be happy. But there are a number of things that can block us from experiencing joy.

One of those things showed up in an old television show. Years ago when our kids were young they loved to watch a cartoon show that was produced by Steven Spielberg. It was called *Pinky And The Brain*. I thought it was hilarious. The central characters were two lab mice who had been genetically altered at Acme Labs using the Acme Gene Splitter Bagel Warmer and Hot Dog Steamer. The result was they were far smarter than normal mice. In particular, Brain, as indicated by his name, was freakishly intelligent. Pinky was smart for a mouse, but comically scatterbrained. There would usually be a point in the show when Brain would say to Pinky, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Pinky would respond with some line like, “I think so, Brain, but if they called them Sad Meals kids wouldn’t buy them.” Every show would have a moment when Pinky would say, “What are we going to do tonight, Brain?” Brain would answer, “The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world.” Brain would hatch one absurdly wild scheme after another in his efforts to take over the world. Brain’s plots are always aimed at giving him power, enslaving everyone else to him. They inevitably fall apart.

Why talk about a silly cartoon show? Because in our own way we all are sort of like Brain. Oh, we may not be trying to enslave others, but we are all continually hatching our plots to control the world so that it will do our bidding. A number of years ago our former worship leader, Dylan Burcombe, performed in the musical MixTape that was playing downtown. Laurie and I went to see it and enjoyed it. The musical weaves together a lot of hit songs from the past. One of them was a haunting melody that was very familiar, I’ve heard it a lot but did not know what it was. I learned it was a hit song originally released in 1985 by a British band called Tears For Fears. The song is *Everybody Wants To Rule The World*. All agree the lyrics speak to the pervasive human desire for power and control.

Our desire for control of things actually adds to the stress in our lives. When it comes to control, I submit bowling as an illustration. I haven’t gone bowling in years, but there is something I’ve done every time I have done it, and I see others doing it as well. Your turn is up, so you step up and send your ball rolling down the lane. Oh no, you see it starting to veer towards the side of the lane where it will either only pick off one or two pins, or might even end up in the gutter. What do you do? You start leaning your body away from that side of the lane as though somehow you can affect the path of the ball. You know that’s not true, but you do it anyway. You can’t help yourself. The truth is that once you have let go of that ball you have zero influence on where it ends up. Much of what happens in life is like that. Yet we cannot help ourselves, we keep trying to control what is out of our hands, and that’s stressful. It actually drains joy from us.

Our efforts to control lead to harm to others and they create tension, anxiety and frustration for us. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, scholar Iain Provan wrote, “As we restlessly pursue control, apart from the worship and love of God, we inevitably destroy each other and damage both the natural world and ourselves.” Our efforts to control things in this world actually keep us from experiencing joy. The freedom we need, and the joy it gives us, is found in trusting in God’s sovereign rule in the world. We can relax, find rest, be at peace, and be joyful when we count on the truth that our God reigns. He is the one in control, and he is the one who should be in control. Nothing threatens him and his plan for he has power over everyone and everything.

Control is a big obstacle to joy, but there is another one that has something in common with control, but it is larger. It is being focused on self. We are sure that taking care of ourselves is crucial for us having joy. But it turns out that focusing on ourselves, pleasing ourselves, actually has the exact opposite effect. It destroys joy. The day before Thanksgiving I had to pick up some turkey, the centerpiece of our feast. I told myself that day to be calm and patient because I knew there would be lots of people out and about and often they would do dumb things. Sure enough, I encountered lots of obstacles, but I was ready for them, so I stayed patient. But the parking lot at the store I went to was a mad house. There were no places to park and there were numerous cars orbiting the lot, hunting for that most precious resource, an open parking space. I began trying to concoct a Plan B for how to attack this problem since I didn’t want to spend the entire day competing with all those other hunters. Then the amazing happened, a parking space opened just ahead of me, one I could pull right into. There was just one fly in the ointment. A woman in the parking space next to it had her car door open, and she was standing there working on something inside her car. It made it impossible for me to pull into that spot without hitting her. I sat there, waiting for her to finish what she was doing. Her friend pointed out to her that she was blocking the space, but she just kept on about her business. Time passed, and she made zero effort to rectify the situation. It was obvious that she was in the way, but she didn’t care. Now traffic was starting to back up behind me. Finally, I had to give up. This woman was keeping me, the center of all things, from doing what I needed to do. It did not fill my soul with glee. Eventually I did find a parking space due, I am sure, to divine intervention. As I walked to the store I noticed the woman was still at it, now frustrating other drivers. My point here is there was no joy in my frustration with that woman who was in my way.

REMEMBER GOD WILL JUDGE

Notice that instruction in verse 9 to “follow the ways of your heart.” Our culture loves that. It tells us if we just do whatever our heart tells us, we can’t go wrong. That idea is appealing to us. It feels freeing. Yes, I don’t need to worry about what anyone tells me I should do. I just need to be myself and follow my heart, and if I do that I will do the right thing.

Sounds great. But there is one huge problem with it. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Uh oh. The prophet claims the heart is deceitful, extremely so. It lies to us. So when we listen to our heart, we are listening to lies. Our heart might tell us what we should be and do, and what it says couldn’t be more wrong. We have all known people who are sure they are doing what is right when it is obviously wrong.

How are we to understand this? The Teacher gives us the answer to how we resolve this problem. He goes on in verse 9 to say, “But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.” The word “but” is important. Yes, follow your heart, but not without limit. Not without some greater guiding principle. Remember that our hearts and our consciences are not as pure as our world claims. They have been affected by the fall that happened a long time ago. They have been tainted.

Yes, follow your heart when it comes to not having other people control you and tell you what you should be and what you should do. But when it comes to right and wrong, bad and good, remember that God is the judge. What we need to follow is what he says. If we fail to follow what he says we absolutely will not have joy in life and we will not make the most of our lives.

APPLICATION

There is one fundamental truth that underlies the ability to do what the Teacher says in this passage, enthusiastically planting our seed, making the most of our days and having joy in our lives. It is the truth that God is sovereign, that he rules over everything that happens. Trusting that God is working his plan, that it is good and nothing can stop it, sets us free to not worry, but to go ahead and make our endeavors, trusting the outcome to him. It means this day I have what he knows I need, so I can rejoice in whatever is going on today. It means I don’t have to fear, but can trust in him and have joy in my heart. Trusting in God’s sovereign wisdom, rule and plan is key to all of it. In his book, *Joy At The End Of The Tether*, Douglas Wilson wrote, “the basis for…joy is divine sovereignty.”

If God is not sovereign, then there is no peace, no joy, there is only stress and anxiety. Years ago there was a conversation that took place in the TV show *The X Files*. Fox Mulder and Dana Sculler were two FBI agents investigating unsolved cases that might involve paranormal activity. In one episode there is a prison chaplain who claims God speaks to him directly. Mulder is skeptical. Scully asks if he thinks God couldn’t do that. He answered, “God is just a spectator. He only reads the box scores.” If God is only a spectator, then there is no peace or joy. But God is much more than a spectator. He is active in our world.

Lamentations 3:37-38 says, “Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?” Nothing happens without God doing or allowing it. Even the calamities, Jeremiah says, come from God.

Romans 8:28 says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” God is active in working in many things. Oh, wait, that’s not right. In most things. No, that’s not right either. God is at work in everything that happens.

I was thinking about that comment that God is a spectator only. Laurie and I have a good friend who was a football coach both in major college and in the NFL. His name was Mike Riley, and he was one of the most positive people I’ve ever known. When he was coaching we watched all of his team’s games that we could, and it was often stressful and nerve-wracking for us, because we wanted so much for his teams to do well. One game years ago was a huge one for his team. It was a nail-biter that was close and undecided until the last minutes. A critical point in the game came where the next play went would determine the outcome of the game. I remember barely being able to watch because I was so tense, and Laurie was the same. Mike had called time out to stop the clock and decide what they were going to do. During that time out the TV camera focused on Mike as he talked to his quarterback. It was amazing. He had a huge grin on his face and at one point broke out laughing. I thought, “How can he be so calm?” I was tense, and he was laughing, looking like he was having a ball. Part of the reason he could be like that is he loved football, and he was in the thick of it. But part of it was he had the ability to affect the outcome of the game. He had some control of what was about to happen. I had no control and had no influence on the events, so all I could do was stress.

My question to you is, do you think God is more like me in that situation or is he more like Mike? Is he just a spectator, powerless to do anything about what is going on? Or is he actively engaged and able to determine what happens? The Bible says he is more like Mike, except he has way more control than any football coach has. Had I known that somehow Mike had the ability to make that game come out exactly like he wanted, I would not have been stressed at all.

We began with baseball today, so let’s end with it. Buck O’Neill was a terrific baseball player back in the 1930’s and 1940’s, a real one. However, he was an African American, and because of the racism that existed at that time he was not given the chance to play in the major leagues. He played in the Negro League, the baseball alternative for blacks. It wasn’t until 1947 that the barrier to the majors was broken by Jackie Robinson. Many of O’Neill’s teammates and friends were bitter about what had been denied to them just because the color of their skin. But at one point at a reunion of Negro League players, Buck was asked by a reporter from *Sports Illustrated* if he had regrets. He said, “Waste no tears for me. I didn’t come along too early. I was right on time. I don’t have a bitter story. I have been truly blessed.” What was done to him was wrong and it angers me. But he was not full of bitterness, though he surely had a right to be. What enabled him to be free of that destructive bitterness was that he believed God is sovereign. Trusting that God works good for us in everything freed him from anger. He wrote an autobiography, and its title reflected that belief. It was *I Was Right On Time.*