

## NOT JUST SANDCASTLES

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 - Part 2 of a 2-Part Series

*The Incredibles* was a Disney animated movie that came out in 2004. The central characters were the Parr family. They were an unusual family. The father, Bob, was formerly a superhero with superhuman powers named Mr. Incredible. His wife was also a superhero named Elastigirl. However, after being sued repeatedly as a result of collateral damage from their crime-fighting activities, they had to leave the superhero business. They were placed into a government relocation program and became an average suburban family. Bob worked at a white collar job that left him bored. One day he arrives home and parks his car in his driveway. As he gets out he sees a neighborhood kid sitting on a bike looking at him. A bit irritated he says to the kid, “What are you waiting for?” The kid says, “I don’t know, something amazing I guess.” Bob wistfully says, “Me too, kid. Me too.”

I suspect that most of us can relate. We sense that we were made for something amazing and it’s not happening. I don’t appear to be anything out of the ordinary. Laurie and I were recently racially profiled at a store. We bought a Kitchen Aid attachment to give as a Christmas gift. Laurie bought it online but we were to pick it up at a local Target store. We went and picked it up at Customer Service. They told us they would email the receipt. We had some other items to buy so we did some shopping then went to check out. At the checkout stand we put our items on the conveyor belt, but I was holding the gift we had already bought. The problem is we had no receipt to prove we bought it. I explained the situation to the young guy who was checking us out. He listened, then shrugged and said, “You don’t really look like people who would steal a kitchen tool.” Yeah, what we look like is an older, middle-class suburban couple with nothing special about us. We look like that because that’s what we are.

We may not look like anything special, but if we are followers of Jesus there is something special about us, and we were made for something amazing. But if we’re going to be that amazing thing we are intended to be we’re going to have to take some risk. It won’t happen if we pursue the path of least resistance or if our goal is to be safe. We’ll see that in Ecclesiastes 11:1-6.

### WE DON’T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN

These verses can be a little confusing but there is also great wisdom in them. Some of the truths revealed here are things we know but often either forget or ignore. The first of those is that we don’t know what is going to happen from one moment

to the next. We certainly don't know what is going to happen days, months or years in the future.

At the end of verse 2 the wise author of this book said, "you do not know what disaster may come upon the land." Unfortunately, we know this is true. We don't know when there will be disastrous hurricanes, earthquakes or tornadoes. We don't know when an epidemic of some kind might strike or when terrorists might hit. In his book, *The Raging Tide*, expert Mike Tidwell said that due to global warming massive hurricanes like Katrina would inundate cities on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts with increasing frequency. CBS news anchor Russ Mitchell said on September 22, 2005 that, again because of global warming, there would be high levels of devastating hurricanes striking the United States. The current White House also predicted frequent violent hurricanes. The American Geophysical Union recently reported that the U.S. is now in a 10-year hurricane "drought." Contrary to the predictions, there have been no hurricanes hitting the U.S. since 2005. That is evidence that we don't know what the future will bring.

This theme shows up again in verse 5. "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in the mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things." We know a lot more today about the "path of the wind" and about how the "body is formed in the mother's womb." Technology has given us remarkable glimpses into the womb, and modern medical science has far greater understanding of the birth process. But having a newborn daughter in our family, I can tell you that a large part of that process is still a mystery. When you start asking questions about why certain things happen and how they work you get a lot of "we just don't know" answers.

We don't know the full extent of what God is doing in the world. Laurie alluded to this reality in her advent devotional. It says Mary was told by an angel about the child she would bear and she treasured these things in her heart, but she had no idea how vast the plan that this child would accomplish actually was. She also had no clue how costly it would be.

All of us would like to understand what and why and how in our lives, but unfortunately God does not reveal all of that to us. Do you understand all that God has allowed in your life? I certainly do not. We hear all the time, "Everything happens for a reason," and I totally agree with that statement. Unfortunately, I also know that an awful lot of the time I will have no idea what that reason is.

Have you considered what you did not know one year ago on January 3, 2015? I had no idea that there would be two terrorist attacks in Paris during the year. I could never have imagined there would be one in San Bernardino as well. San Bernardino? Aren't terrorist attacks supposed to occur in high profile cities like New York and Paris? I had no idea that in the final seconds of Super Bowl 49 Seattle coach Pete Carroll would lose his mind, make a historic mistake and give the game away, thus making Tom Brady the third quarterback in history to win four Super Bowls. I did not know that our daughter-in-law, Anna, would become pregnant and give birth to a beautiful daughter in 2015.

James 4:13-14 says, "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 know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." We don't know what will happen tomorrow. If I knew what was going to happen even one day in the future I could be wealthy in short order. Suppose that I know that the Cincinnati Bengals are going to win the Super Bowl. I could take out a home equity loan on my house for \$100,000 and bet it on them. Right now the odds on them are 25 to 1, meaning I would win \$2.5 million! Just make a few bets like that and I'd be set for life. But I don't know what is going to happen even one minute in the future. None of us do. These verses tell us to get a grip on our situation in life. We must always live with uncertainty and the discomfort of not knowing what is going to happen.

### WE DON'T CONTROL WHAT WILL HAPPEN

To make matters worse, we don't control what will happen in the future. Yes, of course, we can influence things. I can influence my chances of being healthier and living longer by reducing stress, avoiding tobacco, alcohol and drugs, eating a healthy diet, exercising and so on. But all of us know people who did everything right and one day they dropped dead of a heart attack or their health fell apart anyway.

I can make calculated guesses about things that are going to happen, but I cannot control that they will turn out my way. We once planned a beach party for the church in the month of August knowing that at that time of year we were certain to have good weather. That's one of the warmest months of the year for us. Unfortunately, we don't control that. The weather was overcast, gray, cold and misting. We shivered through our beach party, the few of us who showed up.

Yes, but there are many things we *do* control. Up to a point that's true, but not as true as we like to think. Recently, our homeowners' association arranged to have

the streets in our neighborhood repaved. We were warned that we wouldn't be able to drive on them for two days. They gave us a map showing the schedule. Our street would be paved on the first day and the other, the main street, would be done the second day. After the two days only our street was done. It turned out that it took longer for the asphalt to dry than they had figured on. These are people who make their living paving streets, but things didn't go as planned. Some things are just out of our control.

This is the point of verse 3. It sounds like a kind of Zen statement. If clouds are full of water they pour rain on the earth...when a tree falls to the north or south, there it lies... This verse kind of reminds me of a sort of eastern, "Ah, Grasshopper, if a tree falls in the forest, there it lies" saying, "Oooh, that's really deep." No, it's not. It's just dumb isn't it? What does this verse mean?

It means if rain clouds full of moisture come over they're going to drop rain on you whether you like it or not. If the clouds don't come then it doesn't rain, a common problem in California during a drought, and we can't fix that. But what about the tree? It's simple. When the tree falls it doesn't say, "Shoot, I wanted to fall north, but I fell south by mistake. I don't like it here, I want to go over there to the north." It's stuck with its position. The tree is like us. So much of the time in our lives we are stuck with things we don't want, but we just have to deal with it.

I'm annoyed that I'm average height. I always wanted to be over six feet tall. I'm upset that I wasn't blessed with phenomenal athletic ability. I am really unhappy with what has happened with my hair. There's a whole bunch of things I would like to renegotiate about this thing of growing older. But none of those things is in my control. The number of things we could all list that have been out of our control in our lives is endless. This is our lot in life.

## WE SHOULD TAKE THE RISK

We are reminded that we know way less than we think we do about life and we control a whole lot less than we wish we did. You would think the conclusion that we should draw from that is that we should hunker down and play it as safe as we possibly can. Don't take any risk because you have no idea what disasters might blow up and ruin you.

To our surprise, the author tells us just the opposite. At first it's a bit difficult to understand what this passage is telling us. The actual reading of verses 1-2 is, "Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days. Divide your portion to seven 7 or even eight 8, for you do not know what

misfortune may occur on the earth.” Throw your bread on water and it will come back to you? What’s that supposed to mean? If I throw bread on water it’s going to get totally soggy and at that point I’m not real interested in it coming back. And what does dividing your portion have to do with anything? Portion of what? And what does misfortune have to do with it?

This just seems weird. Some scholars claim throwing bread on the water was an ancient idiom for charitable giving. So the idea is, give generously and you’ll be rewarded. Verse 2, then, would mean we should give widely to different recipients. However, there is little evidence that’s what that expression means. As you can see, the NIV has interpreted the word translated “bread” to mean “grain.” The idea is to ship your grain to other places in trade. In other words, in the face of the possibility of disaster, despite our lack of knowledge of the future and our inability to control the outcome of events, the author tells us to boldly engage in trade. Ship those goods overseas even though the ship may get hit by a storm and sink or have to jettison its cargo. I believe this is the correct understanding. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Tremper Longman wrote (p. 255), “it is saying that, in spite of the risks of loss involved, one should go ahead and engage in maritime trade.” In other words, take the risk. Yes, loss is possible, but don’t let that stop you.

Verse 4 warns, “Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.” This is an ancient description of “paralysis by analysis.” You try to game the system, try to figure out the perfect time to take the risk, look for the perfect opportunity, and all you do is keep looking forever. The time will never be right to act. You’ll be like Maverick after Goose died in *Top Gun*, backing out of a fight saying, “No, it doesn’t look good.” Laurie and I knew a young man in his early 30’s who typified this. He was single and just could not commit to a woman because he was never sure. He’s now in his mid-30’s and is still single. He probably will stay single.

What the author is saying is, “Accept how life is. Understand that you don’t control outcomes and often cannot predict them. Don’t let that defeat you. See life for what it is and then boldly forge ahead. Yes, there is risk that it all might blow up in your face, but the alternative is to be paralyzed and do nothing. You’ll end up never doing anything. You might as well not live at all if that’s your approach.”

We’ve all heard the saying, “The greater the risk the greater the reward.” There are some implications in that saying. One is that if you take no risk then there will be no reward. As I consider my life I realize that the greatest joys and blessings of my life required taking considerable risk. Laurie and I got engaged when she was very

young and I was a couple of months away from being an unemployed seminary graduate. We both took a risk. Some people who knew us thought we were unwise, maybe even crazy. Yeah, crazy in love. That risk produced a marriage that has been the greatest blessing of my life. It was a huge risk to decide to have children, especially after we went through the devastation of having a child die. But after spending time with our kids over the holidays I affirm again that the return to us from that risk is priceless.

Another truth about that “greater the risk” statement is that it is impossible to avoid risk. Larry Laudan, an expert in the philosophy of science, spent years studying risk management. He wrote a book titled *Danger Ahead*. In it he summarizes 19 principles for managing risk. The first principle is, “Everything is risky.” If you want total safety, you need to be a different species. The author of Ecclesiastes was there way before Laudan. He is saying the same thing. Accept that everything is risky and don’t let that beat you.

#### WE SHOULD BE WISE

The writer is not urging us to be foolhardy. Verse 2 encourages us to be prudent. “Give portions to 7, yes to 8,” is all about diversifying your portfolio. This is not really investment advice. In the context, if a person was engaged in maritime trade he should not put all his cargo on one ship. The modern idiom is, “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

The point is a person should not just close his eyes to any possible pitfalls or obstacles and take the leap regardless. This is not totally blind faith. There is no value in risk for risk’s sake. It is saying that life is inherently risky. If our desire is to never risk anything we will never do anything.

So the point is that we must understand there is risk. That’s life. Don’t be paralyzed by it. Accept the risk, make the wisest, best decision you can, protect yourself to whatever degree possible, then forge ahead. This is talking about an approach to life. In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Iain Provan wrote, “Life should be embraced for what it is, good and bad...living life fully is its own reward...The person who knows he or she does not control destiny, yet launches into life with enthusiastic abandon, will know at least some reward. But the person who thinks it may be possible to control one’s destiny and seeks somehow to avoid the risk inherent in living cannot know any reward.” One of Laurie’s favorite sayings is, “Embrace the chaos.” That’s what this passage says.

## APPLICATION

I think many people, including Christians, go through their lives with a nagging sense that there ought to be more to them. They wished they had more enthusiasm, more joy and felt more alive. Maybe they even feel like they are almost on auto pilot and life is passing by and they are missing it. They could be bored. For Christians, many wish God was more real to them.

One of Laurie's and my favorite old romantic comedy movies is *While You Were Sleeping*. In it Sandra Bullock plays Lucy, a young woman who works for the Chicago Transit Authority taking tokens at a booth for the El train. She is alone and lonely. She and her now deceased father used to look at world maps and dream about the places they would go, but Lucy never goes anywhere other than her apartment and her job. Through a series of comical and unlikely misunderstandings she ends up being incorrectly assumed to be engaged to a man who is in a coma. But while he is unconscious and in the hospital, she actually falls in love with his brother. In the end, she marries the brother who takes her on a honeymoon to Italy, the place she dreamed of going. There is a line in which she tells the man who was in the coma that she fell in love with his brother "while you were sleeping." But the title could be applied to Lucy herself, who was sleepwalking through her own life, letting it pass by while she never acted, feeling dead inside herself.

In his book, *Divine Appointments*, Erwin McManus says that all too many of us live as observers rather than participants in life, as spectators rather than players. I can attest from personal experience that's no way to live. I have mentioned before that I spent a lot of time in my high school days sitting on the bench watching baseball games, not playing in them. I can assure you that it was a disappointing way to live. I wanted badly to get in the game, to have the chance to make a difference. Maybe I would fail, but at least I would have the opportunity to succeed and make a difference, however it turned out. The last thing we want is to spend our lives sitting on the bench, doing nothing and letting our souls shrivel.

We want to be done with the boredom of going through routine, of watching life pass by. We want to experience the exhilaration of knowing that God is alive, he is real in us, he is working in our daily lives and we are being used by him. We are in the game doing something significant. What specifically do we need to do to accomplish that in this coming year? What must we do to take the risk?

## FIRE THE COMMITTEE

Most of the time our hearts are divided. Last year Pixar released a movie entitled *Inside Out*. The central character is a girl named Riley. The movie depicts her mental headquarters, in which live five personifications of her emotions: Joy, Sadness, Anger, Fear and Disgust. They wrangle over who is going to control Riley and her actions. While the film focuses on emotions as the things that control us, there is more to it than that. You might view your heart as a board room with a big table. Seated at the table are, yes, emotions, but also motives and desires. Your social self is there, along with your work self, your recreational self, your religious self, your sexual self. They form the committee that is running your life, and they are constantly arguing and fighting for control.

The place to start is to fire the committee and let Jesus run the show. We have a tendency to follow the typical evangelical appeal and “invite Jesus into our lives.” In other words, give him a seat at the table. If we really want to come alive what we need to do is to remove all other seats at the table and let Jesus be the king, the one voice we follow. At the critical moment of his life, when the thing he wanted most in the world was to not go through the horror of the cross, Jesus said to his Father, “Not my will, but yours, Father.” That’s the model. If we want to really get in the game, take the risk and be alive, then we must say, “Not my will but yours.” Doing so puts us out there on the scary edge of risk because we are saying to God, “The outcome is yours. I only live to do what you want me to do. The only thing I fear is not doing your will.”

Bob Goff is an example of this. He tells some of his stories in his book, *Love Does*. We were talking about it at dinner on Christmas Eve and my brother, Jerry, said, “That guy is nuts.” That may be how it will look when we fire the committee and let Jesus be the Ruler. After the terrorist attacks on 9-11 Bob talked to his kids about it and at one point he asked what they would say to world leaders if they had the opportunity. One said he would ask the leaders what they were hoping for. Another said he would invite them to their house to talk. The oldest said she would want to visit them and ask what they were hoping for. Goff decided they should do that. They researched and found the addresses for all the leaders of all the countries of the world. They wrote a letter asking if they could visit them and ask what they were hoping for. They sent letters to all of them, hundreds of them. They waited several weeks, and then replies started coming in. They generally were very kind, saying it was a wonderful idea but no, thank you. But then they got a letter from Bulgaria inviting them to come to the palace and meet. Then they received an invitation from the prime minister of Switzerland, then Israel. They ended up receiving 29 invitations! Goff had told the kids that if they actually were invited



they would make the trip. So, off they went to visit all of those world capitals. In most cases, the leaders treated it like some sort of photo op until they found out the kids had no agenda but to be a friend and hear their thoughts. At the end of each interview they handed the leader a key. It was a key to their house. The kids invited them to come spend the night any time. And one leader actually took them up on it. Is that cool, or what? It happened because Goff wasn't dominated by fear, but just let Jesus be the Lord, and followed him wherever he took him.

What does the Lord want you to do in 2016? The overwhelming majority of the answers to that question can only be given on a day-to-day basis as you go through the year. But is there something that God has been putting on your heart that you've been resisting? Is there something that God wants you to risk doing, even though you have no idea if it is possible or how it will turn out, and you know there is the very real possibility of it blowing up in your face?

John Ortberg wrote a book entitled *If You Want to Walk On Water, You've Got To Get Out Of The Boat*. Why do you suppose Jesus chose to pull off that *walking on the water* stunt? Clearly, part of the reason was to show his disciples who he was. But it seems that another part was to teach them the lesson that if you are going to follow him he's going to ask you from time to time to take that first scary step out of the boat. You don't step out of a boat in the middle of a lake. You might dive out of it to go for a swim. Stepping out of it is risky. That first step would feel like a doozy. Maybe you've seen that picture of a US Army Special Forces soldier who has just stepped off the back of an airplane and appears to be hovering in midair while saluting. Maybe it will feel like that to take the risk God wants you to take, but that's where real life is found.

#### FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN GIVE RATHER THAN WHAT YOU CAN GET

Often we fear taking risks because we are obsessed with protecting ourselves and getting more comfortable and safe. In Matthew 16:24 Jesus challenged his disciples to deny themselves and follow him. In verse 25 he said, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." What that means is that as long as we are focused on trying to get something for ourselves, as long as we are about self, we will be forever frustrated and will never find what we are looking for. What we will get is not life, but a living death. The way to actually experience life is to give up self, to live as Jesus lived, serving the Father by loving and giving to others.

I recall an incident that happened when Toby had his second birthday. We had a small birthday party for him and invited a few of his little friends. Our big present

to him was a Cozy Coupe, that little plastic car that kids can sit in and move along with their feet sort of like the Flintstones did. One of Toby's pals wanted his new Cozy Coupe. He insisted that it should be his. This resulted in a big conflict between him and Toby, who was quite possessive of his new toy. Quickly there was anger and tears and some frustration and embarrassment for that boy's mother. That day we could see it play out in front of our eyes. Focusing on what you want, what you can get for yourself resulted in frustration, division, conflict and anger. And here's the real irony. Suppose that boy had gotten that toy. Would that be all he ever wanted in life? Would he have been satisfied for the rest of his life? Of course not. He's a 30-year-old dad and teacher today. I'm pretty sure he doesn't even want a Cozy Coupe any more.

We see something similar with Toby and Anna's dogs, Doc and Banjo. Do you know what they want? Whatever the other dog has. We gave them each a new chew toy at Christmas. Each one wanted what the other had, so they would chase each other for the toy. If Doc got one toy and Banjo picked up the other one, then Doc would want *that* one. It never ends. They are never satisfied. If we follow their lead, focusing on wanting something for ourselves, we will, like them live an endless series of pursuits of something else that ends up not being what we wanted. What the other guy has will look better to us.

There is great joy and satisfaction in giving. If you want to fill your life this year take the risk of expending yourself in the effort to give to other people. It might feel dangerous, even foolhardy at times, and you will have to ignore the voice inside your head that keeps screaming, "What about me? Take care of me." But if you would have the mindset of giving continually to others, whether that be affirmation, encouragement, help, money, time, energy or, most of all, love, you will find your own heart being truly alive.

## FIND THE ETERNAL

Perhaps you have seen some of the elaborate sand sculpture contests. Some of these things are works of art. They are intricate and beautiful and make you wonder how people can create such things. My sandcastle building at its peak was rudimentary or worse. But no matter how large or how elaborate those sand sculptures may be they all have one common trait. They will all become just a part of the beach in relatively short order. The winds and the tides guarantee that they will fall apart, and it won't take very long.

You and I are eternal. We were created by God to live eternally significant lives. Unfortunately, we tend to expend our efforts on sandcastles that will crumble into

dust. In 1 Corinthians 3:12-13 Paul wrote, “If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.”

Like every college, the school I went to had numerous dorms. They were all named things like Green Hall, Marks Hall, Fawcett Hall, Benson Hall and so on. During my years on campus I lived in both Green Hall and Marks Hall which were both named after people. Obviously, they were influential and, most likely, wealthy people. Those important people had what they assumed was a lasting monument to their names. The problem is, I have no idea who any of those people were. No one I knew had a clue who they were, and none of us cared. Whatever they thought they had built that would have a lasting effect, clearly failed.

Steve May is a Christian author and speaker who relates the story of a friend who is a widow. Her late husband had worked out of their home. Frequently, if someone was supposed to come to his home office for an appointment and didn’t show up, he would ask his son if he would like to go outside and play catch with him. It actually was a way he dealt with his frustration. The woman related that at a recent Thanksgiving she and her family all shared what they were thankful for. Her son said, “I’m thankful for all the times Dad would go outside and play catch with me.” He had no idea that those simple times of playing catch were going to have a far more lasting effect than any appointment he might have.

Everything we do to serve God and honor him is going to last eternally. When we get into the chapel on Sunday mornings we’re never quite sure what we’re going to see except it almost certainly will not be set up for our worship service. So, along with Linda and some of the worship team members, we put some chairs away and set others up. Putting chairs out in a building is not your basic high profile, visible and meaningful task. It is kind of menial, and anyone can do it. Yet when I’m going this seemingly small thing I can remind myself that as I do it in service of God it has eternal value. If I vacuum the carpet as a way to serve and love my wife, because this is what God wants me to do, it has eternal significance.

I say again, everything we do to obey God is eternal. That means that even the most menial of tasks can be infused with eternal significance. But they also will be risky, for when we seek to obey God there will always be opposition. Our enemy will try to stop us. When you look at Jesus you see that doing the will of the Father was risky and costly. Look at the lives of his disciples and you will see that living

for the eternal was very risky in the temporal world. But it was worth it. They even rejoiced in the hardships they faced.

Imagine walking so closely with Jesus that his character begins to fill you to the point where people who relate to you feel like they've been with Jesus. Imagine living with so much trust in God in everything that happens that nothing the enemy does fazes you, that no storm can shake you. In what ways might God want you to launch out in 2016? Take some time to answer the question, "One thing that I am going to do this year that I'm a little fearful of doing is \_\_\_\_\_."