

## **Rising Your Life**

### **By David Feddes**

Life is a risk. Any time you start a business venture, you hope it will turn out well—and it might. But then again, it might not. There’s always a chance of failure. And it might not even be your fault. You can make all the right moves and still end up losing money. All it takes is a sudden change in the economy, or a lawsuit, or some other problem you couldn’t see coming—and your investment and hard work go down the drain.

The same is true for farmers. Life is a risk. Every time you plant a crop, you hope for a harvest, but you also risk crop failure. All it takes is too much rain, or too little rain, or a hailstorm, or a frost at the wrong time, and your crop is ruined.

Life is a risk. You can go to college and study hard, only to find that the job market doesn’t have an opening for you. Then again, you may find an opening, but if another applicant has connections with the boss and you don’t, you won’t get the job no matter how qualified you are. No matter what skills you have, no matter how hard you work, you can still fail.

That’s frustrating, isn’t it? We’d like to think that if we plan carefully and work hard and play by the rules, success is guaranteed. But it’s not. Why is that? Why is there always a risk? The answer is simple: It’s because we’re not all-powerful and all-knowing. No matter how hard we work, we can’t control everything: we’re not all-powerful. No matter how carefully we plan, we can’t figure out everything in advance: we’re not all-knowing. We can’t avoid the risk factor.

In Ecclesiastes 11, the Bible talks about risk. One thing this passage makes clear is that some things just happen, and there’s not much we can do about them. Verse 3 of Ecclesiastes 11 says, “If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth.” Now there’s a statement nobody can argue with! You may want sunshine and dry weather, but clouds don’t ask your permission before they make things wet. When it rains, it rains, and there’s nothing you can do about it.

There’s a second statement in verse 3 that’s equally obvious: “Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there will it lie.” You might think, “Duh! A tree falls where it falls. Do I really need the Bible to tell me something so obvious?” But Ecclesiastes is simply giving another example of something that is beyond our control. When a storm knocks over a tree, you might not like where it lands. It may damage a house or block a road—but the tree lands where it lands, whether you like it or not. Storms don’t ask your permission to blow, and falling trees don’t ask your advice on where to land. That’s life. Stuff happens.

We don’t control everything, and what’s more, we don’t know everything. Verse 5 of Ecclesiastes 11 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.” You might think, “Well, that may have been true way back when, but we’ve come a long way since that was written. Now we know all about weather patterns and how babies are formed.” Oh, really? If you think we know all about the weather, you obviously haven’t been following the track record of your local forecaster! Their predictions are often wrong. As for knowing exactly what’s happening in the womb, I remember watching an ultrasound with my pregnant wife and hearing the doctor say, “Sure looks like a boy in there.” When the baby was born, we named her Maria! Later we saw the ultrasound for a different child and heard the doctor say, “Looks like a boy.” We named that child Bethany! Now, if we still don’t have weather patterns or unborn babies completely figured out, we certainly don’t have the infinite Lord of the universe figured out. We “cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.”

We know some things and have a measure of control over some things, and to that degree, wise planning and hard work can sometimes reduce the risk factor; but the only way to get rid of the risk entirely would be if we somehow had the wisdom to know everything in advance and the power to control it all. In other words, we'd have to be God. And we're not.

### **Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained**

Life is a risk. So how should we react? If something involves a risk of failure, why do it? Why not just do nothing? Again the answer is simple: If you try something, you risk failure, but if you don't try anything, you guarantee failure.

If you're an investor or business person you'll never get anywhere if you won't take any risks. If you're a farmer, you'll never have a crop if you need a guarantee of ideal weather for the whole growing season before you're willing to plant, or if you demand a perfect weather forecast before you get ready to harvest. As Ecclesiastes 11:4 puts it, "Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap." If you don't risk failure, you guarantee failure.

If you're a student and you refuse to start writing a test unless you're positive you'll get all the answers right, you won't start writing at all, and you'll flunk. If you need work, but you won't apply for any job that you're not already assured of getting, you'll remain jobless. If you'd like to get married but you're waiting until you know beyond any doubt that it's impossible for the relationship to be anything but sweetness and bliss 24 hours a day for the rest of your life, then just plan on staying single. If you're thinking of buying a house, but you won't close the deal until you know interest rates can't possibly get any better and the value of houses in the neighborhood can't possibly depreciate, then you may as well plan on never owning your own home. In one area of life after another, if you don't risk failure, you guarantee failure.

The passage we're looking at, Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, begins and ends by urging us to keep taking risks. Verse 1 says, "Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again." "Cast your bread on the waters" sounds like a quick way to get a soggy loaf of bread, but it's really a figure of speech for taking a risk. Merchants would "cast their bread on the waters" by sending out ships full of grain or other goods, hoping to sell or to trade for something they could sell at a huge profit when the ship came back. Those ships could be gone for a long time, and there was always the risk that they'd never come back at all. But "nothing ventured, nothing gained," so you would "cast your bread on the waters," trusting your ship would come in.

Verse 6 of Ecclesiastes 11 closes the section by again urging us to take risks and not to be paralyzed by fear of failure. Using the language of farming, it says, "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let not your hands be idle, for you do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well." The risk factor isn't an excuse to give up. It's a reason to keep on trying.

### **Frustration or Faith?**

Life is a risk. The Bible is down to earth and realistic about that. When you don't know what the future holds, it's easy to be worried and frustrated; but if you know who holds the future, you see things in a different light. You don't know everything or control everything, but God does. So you've got two options: you can either get frustrated at the fact that you're not God, or else you put your faith in the Lord and rejoice that God is God. Trust him. Take your risks, keep on trying, and leave the results in God's hands. Life is an adventure, full of challenges and risks, and faith helps us to take those risks.

And faith does more than just help us to take the necessary risks to reach certain goals in this life. Faith at its deepest level moves us to take the ultimate risk: to risk everything on the hope of eternal life. Eternal life is found in trusting a God you can't see, putting your faith in a Savior you can't touch, and investing yourself in a future you can't imagine. Sounds risky, doesn't it? But that's what faith is all about.

Faith means risking your life, betting everything you have on the power of Jesus Christ and the reality of resurrection. If that sounds like too big a risk, I'm sorry, but life is a risk. You can't be saved by playing it safe. "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it," says Jesus, "but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:25).

We saw earlier from Ecclesiastes 11 how a farmer has to take risks and plant his seed if he expects to have a crop. What would happen if a farmer tried to keep his seed safe from crop failure by storing it in a sack and never planting it? He'd be sure to get no crop. Jesus picks up on this idea and applies it to the risk of believing in him. He says, "I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25). The only way to save your life is to die and rise again, to hand your life over to Jesus and bet everything on his resurrection power.

### **Sound Investment**

Before you tell yourself that resurrection isn't a good bet, try thinking in terms of ordinary financial decisions. In business you have to risk money to make money. But although a certain amount of risk is unavoidable, you still want to plan carefully and invest as wisely as you can. What does that involve? Here are three guidelines almost any good investor will follow. First, don't invest in a sure loser. Second, think long term. And third, diversify.

It's crazy to invest in a sure loser. That's the first and most obvious principle. If you get a tip that a company is about to collapse and that all of its shares will become worthless, do you put all your money into that company? No way. Taking risks is one thing; dumping money down the drain is another.

Jesus takes that line of reasoning one step further. "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth," says Jesus, "where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). Jesus says that if we invest everything in earthly things, we're investing in a sure loser. The things of this earth pass away, and even if they don't, we will pass away.

A second principle of sound investment is thinking long term. You can't just think about today or tomorrow. You need to look further ahead. You need to put money into something that will give you a good return in the long run. Otherwise, you'll find yourself in deep trouble when you hit retirement age.

Now, if it's so important to think ahead and plan for those relatively few years after you hit age 65, what about the infinite number of years that come after you die? It will be awful if you have to face eternity without any treasure in heaven. Jesus tells about a man who cared only about his earthly wealth. The man got rich and decided to take an early retirement and enjoy himself. But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you." "This is how it will be," says Jesus, "with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:15-21). Any investor knows that it's a huge mistake not to think long term—and the really long term is eternity.

A third principle of sound investment is to diversify. Any investment involves a risk, but the more you spread your risk around, the safer you'll be. If you invest in just one thing, you'll go broke if that one thing fails. It's safer to invest in a variety of things. That's the idea behind mutual funds. A mutual fund invests in many things, so that even if one goes bad, the others will pay off, and the fund will still make a profit.

Ecclesiastes 11:2 states this principle of diversifying very clearly. After telling us to take a risk and cast our bread on the waters, the Bible says, "Give portions to seven, yes to eight, for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land."

Jesus tells a story that explains and applies all this in a surprising way. A rich man had someone managing his business, and this manager was accused of being wasteful. So the owner called the manager in and told him, "Make a summary of the people you've been dealing with who still owe me money, and then you're finished!" The manager thought to himself, "Oh, no! What am I going to do now? I'm too wimpy to dig ditches, and I'm too proud to beg." Then he got an idea. "I know what I'll do so that when I lose my job here, I'll have plenty of friends to help me out."

The manager called in everybody who owed money. He asked the first, "How much do you owe?" The man replied, "The bill was for eight hundred gallons of olive oil." The manager replied, "I've got the bill right here. Go ahead and change it to four hundred."

Then the manager asked the next person, "And how much do you owe?" "A thousand bushels of wheat," he replied. "Did you say a thousand?" said the manager. "I've got the bill right here. Let's make it eight hundred and call it even."

When the owner found out about all this, he couldn't help admiring the manager's shrewdness. He'd given the man authority to clear things up before leaving, and the man had used this last opportunity to slash everyone's bills and make himself a lot of friends in the process. Now, Jesus doesn't say, "Go and do likewise." He doesn't say to go out and cheat your boss. But Jesus does say, "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (see Luke 16:1-9).

Like that manager, you and I don't have long before our position and our possessions vanish. Our days are numbered. If my only investments are me, myself, and I, I'll end up with nothing in eternity. But if I diversify and invest in others, I'll end up with a lot of friends to welcome me into eternity. Nothing we have can survive death except relationships: our relationships to other people, and our relationship to God. Love is the only thing that lasts forever, love for God and love for others. And the only way to possess love is to give it away.

Is it too big a risk to believe all this and act on it? Maybe you're afraid that if you invest your life in God and in other people, it might not pay off. Maybe you're unsure whether you'll make it to the other side of the grave, or whether anyone else will. Well, even if you're not quite sure about that, you can be sure about one thing: your money and all your other stuff won't make it to the other side of the grave. So if you want to avoid a sure loser, and if you want to think long term, and if you want to diversify, then risk your life on the resurrection and turn your life over to Jesus.

### **Making the Leap**

Are you still hesitating? Maybe you want all your questions answered and all your doubts resolved before you give up on yourself and give in to Jesus. You want to know why God allows certain problems and tragedies. You want answers to every last question about Bible passages that seem difficult. You want ironclad proof of resurrection and life after death. You want proof

positive that Jesus is real. You want to be 100 percent sure before you risk putting your life in his hands. But if you're waiting for all the risk and uncertainty to go away, you won't come to Jesus at all. If you try to play it safe, you can't be saved. Life is a risk. You have to risk if you want to live.

Now, when I talk about risk, I'm not saying there aren't sound reasons for becoming a Christian. There are strong reasons to believe that God is real and that he controls this world. There are strong reasons to believe that the Bible is reliable. There are strong reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead: many of his first followers claimed to have seen him, and they chose to be killed rather than change their story. They bet their lives on what they saw. So rational study shows that Christianity is reasonable, even probable, though we still might not feel sure, given the way our minds tend to operate.

And not only does rational study show probability, it also shows us what is at stake in this decision to follow Jesus. The philosopher Pascal pointed out that if you bet on resurrection and you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing you wouldn't have lost anyway. If you bet on resurrection and you're right, you win forgiveness, joy, eternal life, and friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and you also become a better, more loving person in this life. If you bet against resurrection and you're wrong, you lose everything. You live on a lower level in this life, and in the life to come you lose the happiness of heaven and condemn yourself to the aloneness and suffering of hell as the final result of your self-centered life. Logical reasoning can't remove every doubt about resurrection, and it can't make your decision for you, but it does show the evidence for resurrection, and it shows that you have everything to gain and nothing to lose by risking your life on Jesus.

One author compares it to standing at the window of a burning building. A rescue team moves in with a safety net to a position directly below you. They call out to you, "Jump! We'll catch you." However, the smoke is thick around you, stinging your eyes and making them watery, so you shout back, "I can't see you. What if I jump and you don't catch me?" They shout back, "You can't see us, but we see you. We're in the right spot. Trust us!" At that point, you have two options. You can just keep standing there, wishing you could see more clearly—and you will burn. Or you can trust the voices calling to you, and you can jump. Only when you land do you know for sure that throwing your life into their hands was indeed safe.

So, too, faith seems like a big risk when the smoke of this world gets in your eyes and keeps you from seeing clearly, but the living Lord Jesus is absolutely real, and he catches every person who takes the leap of faith. Faith might seem like a risk from where you're standing, but that doesn't mean it's not certain. It just means you won't feel the certainty until you take that leap of faith and land in the arms of Jesus. Then, as Pascal put it, "you will gain even in this life... and you will see that your gain is so certain and your risk so negligible that in the end you will realize that you have wagered on something certain and infinite for which you have paid nothing."