

Trust Not in the Arm of Flesh
Ecclesiastes 9:11-12; 1 Samuel 14:6
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One of the disappointments in life that we must carefully guard ourselves against is that of thinking that hard work or great talent automatically guarantees success.

Certainly, you would not want to discourage anyone from working hard or developing the abilities God has given him/her in order to serve the Lord and others. In fact, ordinarily faithfulness, diligence, and discipline in the use of the blessings and gifts God has given do yield a benefit in many ways. God ordinarily uses the gospel to bring a sinner to Christ (according to Romans 10:14), but He may give new life to an infant in the womb apart from hearing the gospel, if He so desires (as He did with John the Baptist, Luke 1:15). God ordinarily uses doctors, medications, diet, and supplements to cure illnesses, but He may miraculously heal apart from these means, if it pleases Him to do so (as He did with the woman who was miraculously healed after using all her financial resources on doctors, Luke 8:43). You must not scoff at the duties God gives you to do as means to enjoy the benefits of this life and the life to come.

However, dear ones, the Lord would remind you from His Word today that the right use of God's blessings does not automatically ensure the earthly goals that you have set for yourself to reach. For it is not the arm of flesh that brings success, promotion, or victory. It is not the ability of man that grants success in your endeavors. It is the blessing of God by His most wise and good providence that brings whatever success you might achieve in this life (from the greatest to the least of successes in this life). Who do you chiefly praise when you reach an academic milestone? God or man? Who do you chiefly praise when you get a raise at work? God or man? Who receives the chief credit when your children faithfully serve the Lord? God or man? Who receives the chief applause when you are cured of some illness? God or man? Certainly, you can express your thanksgiving to those who work diligently to help their fellow man. But dear ones, man is simply a tool in God's hand that He uses to accomplish His good pleasure. And to our shame we so often look to the tool for the help we need (and give the tool our praise), rather than looking to the God who wields the tool in His almighty hand to fulfill His purposes in this world (and giving God all our praise).

As you shall see from our text this Lord's Day, God disappoints and frustrates the resources of man, the abilities of man, and the plans of man in order to humble man and in order to remind man that he/she is not God—he/she is simply the tool that God has freely chosen to use for His own glory. As the Apostle Paul said in regard to a matter as important as salvation: "I have planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase" (1 Corinthians 3:6). The same truth should be applied to every other endeavor and accomplishment in life. God gives the increase, and He also withholds the increase for His own holy and wise reasons. If you do not grow in learning this lesson in your Christian experience, you will be constantly disappointed and depressed because your goals were not reached, or you will constantly rob God of the glory that is His alone while making man a god in your own image to whom you give the credit and glory.

The main points from our text in Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 are the following: (1) The Resources of Man Do Not Guarantee Success in This World (Ecclesiastes 9:11); (2) The Ignorance of Man Prevents Success in This World (Ecclesiastes 9:12).

I. The Resources of Man Do Not Guarantee Success in This World (Ecclesiastes 9:11).

A. In Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, Solomon gave a remedy to ward off discouragement when you find yourself in times of adversity: Look at the blessings of God all around you and seek to enjoy them in humble

thanksgiving to God, and do not fulfill this duty to enjoy God's blessings half-heartedly, but do so with your might and strength. For the lawful enjoyment of God's blessings in this life is one God-ordained means of promoting the joy of the Lord in your life.

B. Solomon now gives (in Ecclesiastes 9:11) an inspired word of caution: "I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill." This word of caution is given in order that you might avoid an erroneous conclusion that might be drawn from the previous verse. For Solomon had just said in Ecclesiastes 9:10: "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might."

1. There may be some who think that applying your hand with your might will automatically yield the blessings you seek in the midst of adversity. And if you believe this to be the case, you will be sadly disappointed. How many times have you cried out to the Lord, "God I have sought to be faithful in my Christian life, why did I loose my job, or why did my child go astray, or why did my marriage collapse, or why did my loved one die, or why have I suffered this physical affliction?" This error affects us all at one time or another as it did the prophet Elijah (in 1 Kings 19:10). Solomon's word of caution in Ecclesiastes 9:11 was intended to refute the following error: Do what God commands you to do with your might, and you will certainly reach the goals and enjoy the success of your hard work in this life.

2. This false teaching states, "If I do what God says, then He must immediately give me the blessing that I seek." Dear ones, this view limits God to work by second causes alone, and destroys the freedom of God to work how and when He pleases for His own glory.

3. From the sacramental perspective, God does not always immediately work His grace in the lives of people by means of the sacraments. Sometimes the Lord saves children while yet in the womb before they can receive the sacrament of baptism (as in the case of John the Baptist in Luke 1:41). Or sometimes God saves men (like the thief on the cross) apart from baptism (Luke 23:43). Sometimes the Lord does not save those who are baptized although they have outwardly professed faith in Christ (as we see with Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8:13). Sometimes the Lord saves adults (through faith in Christ) before they are baptized as was true with Cornelius (Acts 10:47) and many others.

4. And dear ones, the same is true in your everyday life as it applies to the work you perform in obeying the Lord. God ordinarily works through appointed means in this world. Ordinarily, those who obey their parents (and all lawful authority) according to the Fifth Commandment will have a long life on earth as God has promised (in Ephesians 6:1-3), but that is not always true as we see in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ who was about 33 years of age when He was crucified. Does the prayer of faith always heal the sick (as some believe is taught in James 5:15)? Why then was Paul not healed of the thorn in the flesh (in 2 Corinthians 12:8-9), or why was Timothy not healed of his many stomach ailments (in 1 Timothy 5:23), or why was Trophimus left sick at Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20)? Does obedience to God always lead to material prosperity? Then why was Lazarus begging at the gate of the rich man (Luke 16:19ff), or why did Job loose all that he had in this world during his time of testing (Job 1-2)?

5. There is no mathematical formula that will bring about the realization of your goals in this life, for God cannot be placed in a box to do what you want Him to do and when you want Him to do it. It is certainly true that your Triune God cannot lie. He will keep His promises. However, He will keep His promises in the way and at the time that He sets and not according to the timetables you set for Him. Sometimes God works ever so slowly in your life, in the lives of others, and in your circumstances (even to the point that you wonder in unbelief whether He is working at all). At other times, God surprises you with blessings or even miracles unimaginable. Dear ones, you cannot bind Almighty God to do what you want and when you want it. For that would lead you to look to your acts of obedience as being the cause of the blessings you enjoy, rather than to the Lord God Himself. It would lead you to put your trust in the means to bring the blessing, rather than to put your trust in God who works by means or apart from means to bring

about His most wise and most holy plan for your life. Remember God had told the Israelites to look upon the brazen serpent in the wilderness in order to be healed of the deadly snake bites, and those who did so were healed. However, the brazen serpent eventually became used in a way God never intended, as the people of Israel continued to look to it for blessing (2 Kings 18:4). The Israelites trusted in the brazen serpent rather than in the living God. And so do you, dear brothers and sisters, when you believe your obedience to God's commands with all your might will automatically bring about the desired blessing you seek. You must rather look in faith to God to work what He sovereignly chooses and when He wisely chooses, obeying His commandments out of faith in Christ, love for Christ, and hope in Christ.

6. And so we see the word of caution given to us in Ecclesiastes 9:11: "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill." God does not always work according to ordinary means, and so you must not put your faith and trust in men, or in the resources of men, or even in divinely appointed means. Your trust must always be in the living God.

a. Dear ones, this is a great encouragement to those who are in desperate circumstances and are utterly powerless to change their lives, to change their circumstances, or to change the people around them. At such times as it appears that a situation is totally hopeless, you can cling to this truth: "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong." The Lord gives victory to a puny little David over a mighty Goliath (1 Samuel 17). The Lord defeats 135,000 Midianites through Gideon with 300 Israelites, who had only trumpets, pitchers, and torches (Judges 7). The Lord delivers Peter by an angel from prison, though shackled and guarded under lock and key (Acts 12). The Lord takes Paul's painful thorn in the flesh and uses it to show forth His might and power through a weak vessel (2 Corinthians 12). This is always your hope, that God is able to use you who are weak and frail to accomplish mighty things for His glory. Will you humble yourself to be used by the Lord? Or will you mope around in unbelief and self-pity at the impossible odds you face?

b. This is also a great warning as noted earlier that your trust cannot be ultimately placed in man or in the resources of this world or even in any divinely appointed means (such as prayer). This is to make an idol out of man, or man's resources, or even of prayer and the ordinances. It is to practice the abominable doctrine of Rome that in the use of the means there is an immediate and automatic blessing. Your trust, beloved, must finally be in the Lord alone, as you read in Psalm 33:16-19: Read it. Remember the words of godly Jonathan, spoken to his servant before the two of them routed a host of Philistines and turned the tide of battle in favor of God's people Israel: "There is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few" (1 Samuel 14:6). So much of the pain and sorrow you experience in this life is due to your falling into this false doctrine. You faithfully do what you know to do, and when adversity rather than prosperity comes your way, you say, "Why Lord? I have done what Thou has commanded me to do. Where is the blessing Thou has promised?" From there you spiral ever downward into unbelief, self-pity, bitterness, and anger against the Lord and against His most holy and most wise providence. The problem here is likely that you were trusting more in the means than in the Lord (who is the Source of all blessing). And this is evident by the fact that when you do receive what you have worked so hard to enjoy, you forget the Lord who gave you the blessing, and rather give credit to man and his resources, rather than giving glory and thanksgiving to your gracious and merciful God. And for this reason the Lord disappoints you in your expectations so often, in order to demonstrate to you that He is Almighty God in whom you are to trust and to whom you are to give glory and thanksgiving.

C. Note the reason given by Solomon in Ecclesiastes 9:11 as to why you cannot put your trust in the arm of flesh: "but time and chance happeneth to them all." In other words, it is not the resources of man that guarantee success or bring to pass the events in your life or mine, it is the divinely ordained plan and good pleasure of God that orders the time and events in your life (even those events that appear from your

human perspective to be “chance” because they are outside the control of man). The word “chance” is better translated as “occurrence” here, as also in 1 Kings 5:4. Here is why you must never consider some particular earthly blessing as a sure and certain result of your strength, your knowledge, your wisdom, or your obedience (even if it is done with your might). It is still your duty to do what the Lord commands with your might, and you hope and pray that certain earthly blessings might attend your obedience, but whether the earthly blessings follow or not, your hope is not in the earthly blessings, but is rather in the God who is the infinite Source of all earthly and heavenly blessings. And He administers those blessings that He chooses at precisely the right time (no sooner and no later than is best for you). The question for you is this: Will you trust Him, love Him, submit to Him, and hope in Him, even if you do not immediately see the blessings, or will your faith, love, and hope be dependent upon first seeing the blessings? Will you trust Him and submit to Him knowing that it is impossible for Him to do you (who trust in Christ alone for your eternal salvation) any wrong? Will you sinfully seek to restrain the infinite God, and reduce Him to a mere man who works and operates according to your own short-sighted plans, when in truth, He is the One who knows the end from the beginning (according to Isaiah 46:10) and who from eternity never had a counselor to tell Him how His good, holy, and wise plan for your life and mine should be administered? It is hard for you as sinful creatures, but you must let God be God. And you must repent for thinking and acting as though you could control Almighty God by your resources or even by your obedience. The duty to obey God is yours, the result and consequences of your obedience are God’s.

II. The Ignorance of Man Prevents Success in This World (Ecclesiastes 9:12).

A. Very briefly, Solomon next gives another reason why there are no guarantees in regard to the success of man: “For man also knoweth not his time.” As will appear from the illustration that Solomon uses of catching fish in nets and birds in snares, man’s “time” here speaks of some adversity, calamity, or disappointment that God brings into your life.

1. The point Solomon is making is that since you are ignorant of the hardships and trials that God will bring into your life (no matter how hard you try, no matter how much you pray, no matter how diligently you work, and no matter how gifted you are), you cannot put your trust in man or in his resources. You may trust man relatively and conditionally, but not absolutely and unconditionally. Only God is worthy of your absolute and unconditional trust.

2. In the previous verse (Ecclesiastes 9:11), Solomon had argued that you cannot finally put your confidence in the arm of flesh, because God foreordains the events that happen in your life (“but time and chance happeneth to them all”). In the present verse (Ecclesiastes 9:12), Solomon argues that you cannot finally put your confidence in the arm of flesh because of your own limitations in knowing what adversities will befall you in the future. Therefore, by both arguments in both verses, you are called to put your absolute confidence in the arm of God and to cheerfully submit to His most wise and most good plan for your life as His beloved children. This is the only way to know the peace of God that passes all understanding (Philippians 4:7). This is the only way, dear ones, to know the joy of the Lord to be your strength (Nehemiah 8:10). To think or act as though you control the events of your life (whether adversities or blessings) is to usurp the place of God as Sovereign. To think or act as though you could have chosen a better plan for your life than God is to usurp the place of God as most wise. To think or act as though you would have been more loving and more merciful in the plan for your life than God is to usurp the place of God as most good. To think or act as though you would have avenged the godly and judged the wicked to a greater degree in the plan for your life than God is to usurp the place of God as most holy and just. Dear ones, to think or act accordingly is to invite misery, guilt, and discipline from your Heavenly Father. However, to think and act in humble submission (even when you have done all that you know to do and yet circumstances still fall out for you by way of affliction, trial, hardship, pain, and disappointment) is to invite the joy of the Lord and to invite the blessings of God upon

yourself. What a testimony to God's loving patience with such hard-headed and stubborn children. And God's patience with you must lead you to repentance and sorrow in how you have offended Him by your idolatry in usurping His place as God (Romans 2:4).

B. Finally, Solomon illustrates the plight of man by using two creatures: fish and birds. Just as fish are taken suddenly in nets and birds are caught suddenly in traps by the wisdom of man, so do tragedies, deaths, illnesses, disappointments in life suddenly (without any advance notice or warning) befall us all by the wisdom of God. Those future events of which one is ignorant may be due to God's discipline in the life of the Christian, who refuses to repent of sin or refuses to learn lessons that God is teaching him/her. But those tragic and disappointing events may befall the Christian as well, when he/she is serving the Lord with all his/her heart and praying and seeking to do what is pleasing to Him (as was the case with Job). Here again this issue comes down to these questions. Does God the Creator have the right to do with His creatures what He wills? Does the Potter have the right to form the clay in the way He chooses? Does your Heavenly Father have the right to give or to withhold from you what He in His infinite wisdom deems best for you? If you answer, "No, He does not have the right", you are living in rebellion against the Lord and you must humbly repent of this grievous sin. If you answer, "Yes, He does have the right", you must seek God's grace to cheerfully submit to Him and His providence in your life, even when adversities come while you are trusting Him, loving Him, and obeying Him. For earthly success is not necessarily granted to those who are most gifted, most wise, or even most godly. However, the joy of the Lord (regardless of the earthly success you gain or the lack thereof) is granted to all those who learn to cheerfully submit to God's good providence, even when adversities follow diligence, faithfulness, and obedience to God's good commands.

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