

# ***Spiritual Practices for Thriving Life***

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## **Make It Count**

What was the cost of a situation in which your knowledge of the world proved wrong?

What have you learned by a solid plan failing?

What might God be calling you to do without any clear plan or expectation of measurable results?

**Ecclesiastes 11:5-8** – <sup>5</sup>Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother's womb, so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything. <sup>6</sup>In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle; for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good. <sup>7</sup>Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. <sup>8</sup>Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all; yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

### **I) Use Your Knowledge...**

Today, it's possible to learn almost anything about everything. Not sure why an appliance isn't working? Google it. Unsure how to fix the problem? Youtube it. Instant access to all this data has convinced us to substitute instructions, facts, and opinions for true knowledge. This works well enough, until it doesn't. Yet in this environment we are all pressured to give an answer without much research or reflection. This causes us to think we understand a lot more than we do. God's word suggests true wisdom starts with acknowledging our ignorance.

◆ **Know-it-all:** We are deceived easily. We mostly communicate with others who share our interests and experiences. Thinking and feeling similar things as each other, we believe this to be confirmation of our understanding of the world. In matters about which we understand little, the deception is quickly dispelled when we run into an expert willing to test our knowledge and push beyond our boundaries of understanding. The Holy Spirit reveals the deception using a common

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occurrence, “Just as you do not know how the breath comes to the bones in the mother’s womb... (Ecc 11:5).” Before God can build us into His righteous people, He must break down our stubborn belief we already know all we need to live well.

◆**Eager student:** It’s one thing to be humbled by an expert revealing our lack of understanding. It’s another for the expert share their understanding of a subject. One stumps us. The other inspires. We feel awe, and perhaps curiosity, as foreign concepts fly by. The Spirit does not indicate our ignorance to shame us, but to cause curiosity and instruct us. He wants us to seek God’s wisdom, writing “...so you do not know the work of God, who makes everything (v5).” God wants us to engage Him for true understanding.

## II) Manage Your Expectations...

The more we understand, the better we predict and control the world around us. Our exaggerated belief in our understanding fools us into believing we have extraordinary control. As a result, we invest all our efforts—hopes and dreams, too—into Plan A. Often with no Plan B. As we see Plan A work, we cut all the margin of error out of it, until it’s working perfectly...until the unexpected. Then disaster strikes. Convinced as we were, we feel frustrated and ashamed by the failure. Jesus redeems us from shame and frees us from the unnecessary frustrations that come with unfounded expectations. He replaces those feelings with the wisdom of humility.

◆**Plan A:** Having worked to understand our circumstances perfectly, we adopt plans that take full advantage of them. Often this means investing everything into the success of a single venture. It becomes our source of provision, wealth, and pride. Perhaps it becomes successful enough that others are dependent upon it, too. This seems wise because such concentrated efforts can produce greater rewards than more conservative approaches. God’s wisdom contrasts with this approach. He says, “In the morning sow your seed, and at evening do not let your hands be idle (v6).” God must know something we don’t.

◆**Reinvest:** God indeed knows something we don’t—far more than one something! Many great enterprises fail spectacularly because those in charge were functioning on a *misunderstanding* of the world. This phenomenon is not relegated to the domain of big business, or any business. All our expectations for creating a good life from our own understanding is foolish because of how much we do not know. God, “who makes everything (v5),” advises us that “you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good (v6).”

If we take the time to reflect, in just a moment or two we can identify many factors outside our control and our understanding that could derail our plans—or cause another to succeed. God instructs us to redirect the faith we expressed by going all out for our plans to investing our all in His plan—also known as *obedience*.

## III) Ignore Distractions...

We use our powers of understanding to plan our lives and judge ourselves by how our results stack up. Deceived by Satan’s lies, most plans seek a form of peace and prosperity secured by fame, fortune, and power. It seems that most of us judge ourselves as failures against an impossible standard yet believe many around us are successes. This begets envy, depression, and self-loathing, sources of the devil’s glee. God’s Word dispels the myth of our understanding, tears down our expectations, and exhorts us to ignore the distractions all around us while pursuing His plan by obedience.

◆**Next:** For example, we are easily distracted by seeming success. When life goes as planned and results meet our expectations, we can locate all our joy in what is now a *past result* and focus our hope on the *next step*. This ever-escalating pyramid of success sets us up for dismay when adversity strikes. God urges us to ignore the distraction of success, telling us “Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun. Even those who live many years should rejoice in them all (v7-8).” He calls us to abandon our grand Plan A, humbly pursue His plan, and rejoice for the gift of every day.

◆**Vanity:** Every day. Even days—years—of difficulty. Difficulties are another form of distraction. They distract us from the goodness of life, the blessing of God’s presence, the certainty of our eternal being and purpose. The Word does not shy from the reality—the certainty—of difficulties, saying “yet let them remember that the days of darkness will be many (v8).” But it dismisses this as a *distraction*, writing “All that comes is vanity (v8).” Not life, but life’s ups and downs, the results we so eagerly crave. We enter a year fraught with existential threats including wars, a tense election, the advent of AI. Many of us face our own personal existential threats of all kinds. Yet here God tells us not to worry, to trust His mysterious ways, diligently pursue His plan by obedience, rejoice in His gift of life and know all else comes and goes. Those serious about living as God’s people be warned, He is *not* assuring that by adopting His plan we will understand it and know what to expect. Only that every day of life is worthy of joy because it is another day to know and be made like Him. In the end, this counts.