



Lessons Learned

Part 1 – Winning at Work in Uncertain Times

Pastor Ted Cunningham

For the next few weeks, we're going to be going through Ecclesiastes and looking at Lessons Learned, observations and lessons learned from that great book of the Bible. We're going to apply them to what we've learned in 2020 and going into 2021.

So, here's the question I'm going to ask you: Who are the happiest people on earth? Years ago, an English newspaper asked that question and they got four top answers. Nobody at 8:30 got it. Who are the happiest people? Yell it up at me here in the castle. Christians. Kids. Demolition workers. There is a lot of satisfaction in that. That's fun. I don't like to build things, but I like to tear things apart. What else? Dog owners. Good answer. None of them on the list. Keep going. Rich people. No. That's the whole point. Thank you for taking us there. There are no millionaires on this list, no kings, queens or tycoons.

Here are the four prize winning answers to "Who are the happiest people on earth?" 1) a craftsman or artist whistling over a job well done. 2) a little child building sandcastles. 3) a mother after a busy day, bathing her baby. Really? Who says they are the happiest when giving the children a bath? We got one.

Katie was telling us... This is a great story. You know when your kids are still young enough and bathing together, but the one of them is older and the youngest decides "I cannot only take a bath, but I also can go to the bathroom." And that oldest kid is up on the tub yelling, "Get me out of here!"

Let keep moving. 4) a doctor who has finished a difficult and dangerous operation and saved a human life. Those are the happiest people. I believe three of the four of those.

It's an interesting way to end 2020 because we're still learning all these great lessons from 2020. A lot happened to people financially, with their businesses and their jobs and we want to look at some great lessons today as we all move into 2021. This could actually be a recovery plan for your life that we'll learn today for high school graduates, college graduates. What do you do when the job market in your particular field or your trade may be soft?

We're going to start with where some of you are at to show the differences and to create a fight in the church today so just be at peace as we go through this. Some made great gains in 2020. Their names are Amazon, Walmart, Lowes, and Home Depot. They all did really well. But even in our town, when this all hit at the beginning of the year, we didn't know that outdoor sales were going to go through the roof and you wouldn't be able to buy a kayak.

We didn't know that recreational activities were going to sky rocket. So, some businesses, even within the hospitality industry, did very well while others suffered. Some even went out of business. What do you do with that?

How about this one. Some in here received stimulus, that sweet stimulus cash, and some didn't qualify. There are those in here... and we've heard all the stories. There are some in here who your boss, your work received the PPP, but they sent you home to be on unemployment anyway. They are not using the PPP appropriately or I would even say legally and you're like what do we do about that? It's frustrating because you didn't see any of that money.

And at the same time, some of you... And this is where landlords are a little frustrated. It's bottoms up as well because some of you received the stimulus that should have gone towards a rent payment and it didn't. You're like, *I don't know why my landlord is frustrated with me.* It's probably because you haven't paid rent in three months and they saw you walking in with a 70" TV to put on the wall. See, this is what's going on.

This is why the Babylon Bee... It's one of my favorite news sources. It's not a new source. It's satire, it's comedy. If you remember in October, President Trump retweeted a Babylon Bee article as though it was news. He got in a lot of hot water. But here are some of the Babylon Bee articles that I've just loved during this time.:

Americans excitedly anticipate getting paid with their own money. And the republicans all laughed. And then they go after Dave Ramsey all the time and I love it. If you are a Dave Ramsey fan... These are some of my favorite. *Dave Ramsey dresses up as a mall Santa to tell kids, "You can't afford that."* This is one of my favorite Dave Ramsey ones. *Dave Ramsey releases, "Should I buy this magic eight ball that always answers NO."* And add on top of this whole stimulus thing *1.2 million dead Americans receive stimulus.* I have no problem with 1.2 million people receiving stimulus so long as they vote. Oh no, not working at 10:00? It killed at 8:30, I've got to be honest with you. We're still very sensitive over that one.

How about this? This one we've heard from the folks and this created a lot of tension in our community. Some made \$900.00 a week on unemployment for months while others and maybe friends of yours or family members worked 40 hours a week for the same \$500.00.

What's the recovery plan? How do you move forward in your work or in your business when calamity hits? That's what we want to wrestle with today and we're going to learn from the Book of Ecclesiastes. What should we do when calamity falls on us suddenly and unexpectedly?

If you have your bibles, turn to Ecclesiastes 1 and then we're going to jump to Chapter 9 for two verses that sum up 2020 financially, and for many businesses, sums it up to a tee.

In Ecclesiastes 1: 1-3, we get introduction, theme, and purpose for this book. I love this book. If you are a realist, you love this book. If you've ever said to your kids, "Life is not fair..." Raise your hand if you've

ever said that to your children. Today, you're going to get verses for that. Life is not fair. That's my dad's favorite saying. This book can be dark and pessimistic, and it very much fits my personality.

We're going to Ecclesiastes 1: 1-3 and it starts with the author, the words of the teacher. And as most teachers do, there are questions asked, observations made, and lessons learned. **1 The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem...** And then we get this emphatic statement. **2 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."** **3 What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?** Welcome to Woodland Hills Family Church; we're here to try to encourage you on your journey.

What is he saying? We read this and we're like, *well then there is no purpose to human endeavors under the sun. what's the point of it?* He makes this statement to constantly bring us back in this book, to that which has true meaning and value and significance and purpose and even permanence, that what we do for God under the sun matters. But there is a lot that we can pursue. Travis talked about this a couple of weeks ago when he took us to Ecclesiastes 2 that some pursue laughter, wine, building houses, planting vineyards and they think, *that's where I'm going to find true satisfaction in life.* Then they find *that doesn't ultimately fulfill me.* So, he's going to keep coming back to this chasing after the wind.

And then we get this other idea of **3 What do people gain...** And the word there literally means profit. After all I do to work and all that my business produces, what is left over? That is the profit, that is the gain. And then the final big theme, **...from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?** Working can be grueling labor under the sun. By under the sun, he's going to be referring to – and throughout this book – as life on earth as we go about all that we do and all of our work.

Now, you had a business that maybe you lost, or you lost a job during the pandemic. For some, they were reeling from this and they were thinking *I'm fast at what I do, I have a strong work ethic, I'm skilled, I have knowledge and wisdom in how to do this job, and yet it still didn't work out for me.* This is what we want to start with in these lessons that we're going to learn.

In Ecclesiastes 9, Solomon says, **11 I have seen something else under the sun...** So, this is the observation, this is the life is not fair verse. He says, **The race is not to the swift...** You can be fast, but it doesn't mean you're going to win. **...or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.** Meaning you can work hard in a business, you can bring your skillset to it and your knowledge to it; you can be faster than your competitors in town and still lose a business or lose a job. And it can happen, it can fall on you unexpectedly.

12 Moreover, no one knows when their hour will come... This isn't speaking just of death; it's speaking of this unexpected, unplanned, "didn't see it coming" moment when calamity hits as it did for most of us – if not all of us – in March. And then these word pictures: **As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.**

Yes, you can point some of the calamity that hit you to a virus, but then it was decisions that were being made. Maybe you were labeled essential or non-essential. Decisions started to be made about you and

your business, and these were federal decisions. Some were state decisions, some were local decisions, and it frustrated you. You're like, *but I have so much to offer and yet your business suffered.*

So, what can we do about it? We want to go through Ecclesiastes. Now, in Proverbs, you can read a lot about finances, you can read a lot about taking care of yourself with income and work for the future, but we're going to stick with the Book of Ecclesiastes and look at five lessons today of what we can do, moving forward. For some it's a recovery plan. For others, it's being prepared for the next calamity. Some of you are like, *this is a great way to end the year right here, Ted.* How many of you watched that end of the world movie that's on TV right now? It's called *Freeland*. I watch end of the world movies to be prepared and to get my Tacoma fully loaded down. If I've got 48 hours to live, I'm not driving to Greenland. I need everybody to know that. I've got some other things... We're safer in Missouri.

But these five we're moving forward with in Ecclesiastes:

1. Stay calm. When it hit, can you think right now of family and friends who were at peace? They were at peace, they were going to ride it out and see what happens. But then other people freaked out. When we get to the fifth lesson learned today, we'll see what all of us can do to be better prepared emotionally when trials hit us, when calamity hits us.

Here's what we read in Ecclesiastes 10. ***4 If a ruler's anger rises against you, do not leave your post...*** In other words, do not resign immediately. ***...calmness can lay great offenses to rest.*** Or, as my Edward Jones advisor likes to share with me, the only person that gets hurt on a rollercoaster is the one who jumps off. There is great truth in that. When the stock market went down to 19,000 some of you panicked and you had friends telling you, "Hold on, hold on, don't jump off now, it could go back up." It might not go back up, but we're going to learn what to do to be better prepared for these times that we don't know what's coming. So, remain calm.

2. Guard your tongue. This one is very important. Have you experienced anybody venting about their job or business or employer online? I've seen people leaving work, knowing that their company got a good little bit of money called PPP. They go online or they've connected with me going, "Hey, I know where the bodies are buried at that place. This guy either starts writing checks or I'm naming names." Guard your tongue during times of calamity.

12 Words from the mouth of the wise are gracious, but fools are consumed by their own lips. 13 At the beginning their words are folly; at the end they are wicked madness—14 and fools multiply words. In other words, they are just filling the room with words and venting.

No one knows what is coming—who can tell someone else what will happen after them? That's where we move into these three last lessons that we'll spend more time with. But, it's very important that we guard our tongues during times of calamity.

20 Do not revile the king even in your thoughts, or curse the rich in your bedroom... Gary Smalley used to always say, "Everything you say is repeatable and it can come back to you." That even if you're with someone who is an intimate friend or a close friend or family member and you start venting and

pouring... everything you say is repeatable. Even in intimate moments, guard your tongue. We have the research out... I don't know if you've seen it lately. I've been reading it. We think venting helps and we'll tell people just get it off your chest. It actually doesn't help your emotional state to vent. It's better for your emotional and mental health to guard your tongue. You guard your tongue, you guard your life. The scripture says, **...because a bird in the sky may carry your words, and a bird on the wing may report what you say.** So, when calamity hits, we remain calm, guard our tongues.

3. Take risk in multiple ventures. I love this one as we continue through Ecclesiastes. That could be businesses, but that also can be jobs. It's time for a side hustle, it's time for another job. We read in Ecclesiastes 11, **1 Ship your grain across the sea...** We're going to get a maritime and a farming illustration. **...after many days you may receive a return. 2 Invest in seven ventures, yes, in eight...** So, practically, I'm encouraging everybody in here to have seven jobs. You need seven jobs or small businesses. And here's what it says. **...you do not know what disaster may come upon the land.** So, guess what? Don't put all your eggs in one basket means if you're only in one thing and calamity hits and wipes that one thing out, you've got nothing to fall back on.

I have a lot of friends who are comedians that they make their living on stage. Guess what? The Stage died in March, April, May. I was with a buddy in November who did three total gigs and, as a comedian, you can't feed your family on three total gigs. He goes, "I'm getting another business going, I'm taking another job."

I talked to one guy who was on Broadway and he now is a receptionist in a health club. He goes, "Even if Broadway opens up soon, I'll keep that job to have something. You never know what's going to work and what's not going to work. You don't know exactly how things are going to pan out so be prepared. Have more than one job. Have more than one venture. You do not know what disaster will fall.

3 If clouds are full of water, they pour rain on the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where it falls, there it will lie. 4 Whoever watches the wind will not plant; whoever looks at the clouds will not reap.

So, some of you are going to wait for the perfect time to start this business and I'm just going to try to encourage you. The perfect time may be right now. And it ain't perfect. You have to get after it. I have a buddy who owns a restaurant in this town. He called me a couple of weeks ago and he had enthusiasm in his voice that I didn't hear in his voice in March, April, and May. He said, "I'm starting this business. I'm still keeping the restaurants, but I'm starting this business. I wanted you to know about it. If you know anyone who could use it." That excitement in his voice to say, "I know I may not make a lot of money doing something, but I know it's going to feed my family." That's what we would call a low risk, low reward business.

I loved when I heard the entertainers in town who couldn't work in March or April or May so they started a landscaping businesses. They got going and diversified during this time.

Some of you are going to wait for the perfect time, the perfect scenario, the perfect situation. The scripture says you'll get after nothing. So, what's your side-hustle?

I have another buddy in here that lost his job. He's had a couple other jobs and tried to take these jobs and things just haven't worked out, as you can imagine trying to get another job is one thing but starting a new career in the middle of this pandemic has been very challenging. He's just had the attitude *I have to do a couple different things right now that maybe from here on out, but I'm going to do it.*

4. Hustle. You've heard of the side-hustle, but this is the hustle. Let me tell you... Young people, if you want to know how to please an employer today, old people love the word *hustle*. Al, your greeter on the way in, he laid bricks. I worked for a mason during college and this mason was such a gentle soul. Almost daily, he would remind me, "Ted, you make us no money." *Thank you. That's why I'm here, to do all I can to help.*

He wanted me to know we're only making money when this brick goes on the wall. He said, "Don't you dare slow me down. There better be mortar on this board and there better be stacks of bricks right there. I don't care if you're sweating or if you're hurt. Don't let me stop." I mean he was... *Grace* would be the word I would use to describe this guy. I was sharing that with Al after the last service and he goes, "Oh yeah! I think we all learned that." They love hustle.

So, even if you take a job you're not skilled at or you have no knowledge of, I can tell you... In the first service... I'm not going to ask in this service or online. Raise your hand if you're an employer looking for someone right now to work. How many of you would take someone who just worked hard but didn't necessarily know how to do it? That's why we have this thing called entry level jobs or minimum wage. Get after it. This is the work ethic part.

Continuing in Chapter 11 - ***5 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're going to see today we're called to diligent labor and then trust the sovereignty of God. Get out there and work hard and trust God with the results.

6 Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle... We get this word picture from Chapter 1. Don't slow down. Now if you're a workaholic working 20 hours a day, that's a different message for another day. The message today is for people to get working. And all God's people said... Amen. It's for people to hustle. I love this word picture because you go to work, maybe you work a job in town, in the community, in the morning and you get home in the evening and this is what you would call your side-hustle. Your job at night. ***...for you do not know which will succeed...*** So, you go out and you have multiple jobs or multiple ventures. ***...whether this or that...*** One may work, one may not, but obviously we want this last part. ***...or whether both will do equally well.*** That's the goal. We would love that, but we don't know.

One of our staff members has a daughter who is a pastry chef at a high-end restaurant in a large city. As soon as she went in... You can image, high-end restaurants went down pretty quickly and closed pretty fast in March. As soon as she was told the restaurant was closing, she didn't go home. She got in her car and she went looking for a job. She ended up working at an ammo depot. This was a restaurant in Texas in case you're wondering. She ended up going and I don't know what you do in an ammo depot, but she was working. It's that hustle.

When everything shut down but then PPP hit, and you saw help wanted signs everywhere in town... My son was 14 at the time; he turned 15 in the summer. But I drove my son up and down the strip and I said, "Never is there a better time for a 14-year-old to get a job." I took him place after place after place. Carson looks at me and goes, "You're loving this, aren't you?" I go, "I can't explain to you how much I'm loving this. This brings great joy to a parent to see a kid who is working hard."

In Ecclesiastes 9, if you go back to that, you read, ***10 Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might...*** That sounds like Paul in Colossians, doesn't it? "Do you work as unto the lord, not to human masters." ***...for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*** In other words, under the sun, this is your shot right now at work.

When you get to Ecclesiastes 10 again, Verse 18, I want to give you the context for this. It's okay to have hobbies, it's okay to have a good time, and it's okay to do what we did on Thursday and Friday, which was a feast. We gathered with family and friends, we laughed, and we ate way too much. We did, and we enjoyed it. But life can't be all about that. Because if it's all about feasting, if it's all about the good times, the fun, and the hobbies, the scripture says, ***18 Through laziness, the rafters sag...*** This is the responsibility part. ***...because of idle hands, the house leaks.***

The context of that in Ecclesiastes is a king who loves to party. A king who loves to feast. A king who loves to gather the subjects and have wine and food and party all the time from morning to night. We just read that's not how life works, that's not how responsibility works. You can't party from morning to night or your house will fall apart. Not to mention what you read in Ecclesiastes 10 that if the king depletes the states funds for this, you have no money to do what needs to be done.

And you read, ***17 Blessed is the land whose king is of noble birth and whose princes eat at a proper time...*** What it's saying is there is a time for feasting. It's what we did this weekend, but now we're going to move back and there's going to be more feasting this week, but we're going to move into the responsibility that we have before us. The feast is ***for strength and not for drunkenness.*** If you're partying all the time, you're partying for all the wrong reasons.

And then it says, ***19 A feast is made for laughter, wine makes life merry, and money is the answer for everything.*** The idea here is that you can just throw money at anything you need in life and everything is going to be great and you're going to find ultimate fulfillment, and it's just not true. Remember God has enabled you to work. We learn this in Ecclesiastes. He enables you to work and he also enables you to enjoy the fruit of your labor. So, we get after it and we work hard.

5. Trust God. Trust his plan for your life. We don't know what 2020 brings, but I have great faith in the promises of God. I know he's got me, and he's got you. We read in Ecclesiastes at the very end, ***13 Now all has been heard...*** So, this is after so many observations and questions and lessons throughout this great book. ***...here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments...*** Trust God, fear God, and do the right thing. ***...for this is the duty of all mankind. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing...***

Be encouraged for those of you right now who are working hard and you don't get the pats on the back that you think you deserve. You didn't get the bonus this year that you think you deserve. You didn't get the raise this year that you think you deserve. And you're like, *I bring my best. I bring all of my resources to this job. All of the assets that were just stated in Ecclesiastes 9: 11, I bring all of that. I work hard, I work fast, I'm diligent, I don't rip my employer off and sometimes I feel like he or she doesn't see it.* God brings every deed into judgment including every hidden thing. **...whether it is good or evil.**

This week I read something that encouraged me. I hope it encourages you. It was by Carolyn Mahaney. She referring to this very last part. After all the observations, after all the questions have been asked and answered through this great book, here's what she says about this text:

"Finally, Ecclesiastes helps us to see beyond our unhappy business. Even if your friends walk away, your business fails, or you are forced to move to a smaller home, you can persevere because the final value of your work is not found in this life. In other words, it is not left to us here and now to determine the value of our work."

Remember he said meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless. We're wanting to pursue work and, in our work, find that which has value and worth and meaning and permanence. For God will bring every deed into judgment whether it's secret thing, good, or evil.

As one author puts it, *"Perform the duties of your present circumstances."*

Do the right thing. Be diligent in your labor and trust the results to God.

"Trusting God, who will ultimately judge the fruitfulness of our work and give us our heavenly reward. This means that to matter how much heart you have poured into a failed friendship, how much creativity, time, resources, energy you invested in a business you now have to lose or how much effort you put into a home you have to leave, your work for the Lord is never a net loss. Let me say it again. your work for the Lord is never a net loss because you never know how God is going to use it."

This is why Paul exhorts us in 1 Corinthians 15, **58 Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.** Life under the sun is brutal and it shows no signs of getting any easier. That's my encouragement to you in 2021. Our work is cursed and will more likely than not, fail us on some human level, but the godly man or woman can face the future with peace and confidence. Why? For the same God who told us that life is hard has also told us that he will be near. We trust God.

Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6, **25 Therefore, I tell you do not worry about your life...** Don't be worried about 2021. Let your head hit the pillow tonight, trusting God's plan and trusting the future in the hands of God. ***"...what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"***

I had a great moment yesterday with the family. It's one of my favorite things to do when someone is trying to work through issues in life to remind a person of their value. If you're having conflict in your family right now, do you know what I would encourage you to do? Just go home and remind that loved one how much you love them, care for them. You disagree on things and maybe how things are going to get accomplished. "I love you, I care for you; you are valuable"

In our work with couples, we do the same thing. Sometimes a couple at odds with each other will forget their value and their worth and their love. When a couple begins stating that again, those words come out of their mouth and things begin to change.

Some of you in your work right now need to be reminded of the value you have before your heavenly Father, period. He cares for you. He watches over you.

The scripture goes on, ***Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?*** Answer that for me. No. ***28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...***

Whatever new venture you take on next year, seek his kingdom and his righteousness. Whatever new job you take, additional business you take, side-hustle you take, seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. ***...and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.***

Each day has plenty for us to tackle and to go through. High school student, college student worried about the future, continue to pour yourself into your studies. Fear God and keep his commandments and do the right thing. Be diligent, hustle, guard your tongue, stay calm, trust God's plan working out in your life. The person who has been labeled non-essential, you have value before your heavenly Father. You have value before God. He's caring for you, he's provided for you through 2020 and I'm convinced will provide for you through 2021.

For those who have to close a business and so much of your life... I remember sharing this with Chick-fil-A owner/operators years ago because every piece of clothing they own has the Chick-fil-A logo on it. They drive cars with the Chick-fil-A logo on it. I told them Chick-fil-A is your income, not your source of life. Your value comes because you are created in the image of God and he cares for you. You are a child of God because you place faith alone in Christ alone.

Whatever 2021 brings to you in your business or your job, just get after it. Take risks whether it's low risk with low reward or high risk with high reward, get after it. Now, if you do high risk/high reward and you lose, don't come back to me; don't blame this service at all; I was just quoting scripture. But that's my prayer for you.

There were a lot of conversations this year about the pandemic like what do we do for our health? And so many of our folks right now watching at home who are recovering from COVID and so many in here recovering from COVID. We lost a dear member of our church who died of COVID last night and comes to our 8:30 service. We've had so many of those conversations, but I would say that right alongside those conversations have been the conversations of what does my financial future hold? I can't tell you 100%, but I do know what the scripture teaches and that's we can trust God as we work hard and we get after it and we try new things, and we take new risk as we move forward.

Father, I pray for every business owner in here. I pray for every theater owner in here, every show owner, every attraction owner, every worker, every employee of every show, attraction, business, restaurant, store, from retail to service industry and the hospitality industry. There's so much to think through for our little town here in Branson and surrounding community.

I just pray creativity is coming to our church members and to our church family even watching at home and maybe instead of wrestling through the loss of their job or business alone... that yes they are going to process it and they are still grieving there, but that they would have a very bright picture of a special future and for what next year can look like if they would just hustle and work hard, guarding their tongues and staying calm. I just pray a blessing on our church family during this time.

Thank you for the generosity that was poured out in this community and around the world through this church, and I ask that you continue to bless that generosity. We pray for the one that has never placed faith in Jesus that today would be the day they confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord, they believe in their heart that he has been raised from the dead, that they would confess their sins and they would trust Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

We pray all of this in the name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.