

When Life Says 'Surprise!'

How Can We Cope With Uncertainty?

Life is full of surprises, in fact, sometimes life is a lot like living inside a giant Nintendo video game, just when you think you've got it figured out, along comes a new surprise... Have you ever played that popular little video game known as "Mario" ? If you haven't, ask your kids, they surely have. Ask them what sorts of things happen to Mario when you play the game. You'll get a kid's eye view of "uncertainty". In the video game Mario you are a pizza delivery man named Mario trying desperately to move through a threatening and uncertain world. Along the way you face lots of challenges and lots of threats--any of which may spell the end of your short digital life. Those of you who've played the game can picture it easily. Those of you who haven't can imagine Mario's rationale for running so fast across the screen. There are dozens of threats you must avoid to survive in this game. It would be nice if this were only a game, but it sounds just a little bit like real life doesn't it?

1. You and I face lots of unexpected surprises! Not killer mushrooms, but real life things like maybe a lost job or an accident or an illness, a lost opportunity or option. Think about the unexpected things you've been exposed to in the last few months (Here's my list just in the month I am writing this article: My in-laws car was stolen, my wife's sprained ankle, my company's third round of layoffs, the Jack in the Box e-coli poisonings occurred three miles from my home and took the lives of several children, a drunk driver near our home struck a family station wagon killing a five year old child, my front tire exploded one day . Wow, I'm tired just

writing the listl...

Then there are uncertainties in the things we try to accomplish that may or may not go well--like getting into the right college, landing the perfect job (or ANY job), or finding a mate etc.

2. You and I face lots of uncertainties every week of our lives (tone: concern / sincere / identify) --challenges, threats, uncertainties. But there's a passage of Scripture in Ecclesiastes 11 that helps us understand how faith copes with uncertainty...It helps us understand how a Christian who seeks to live by faith should respond to the often frightening uncertainty and risk we face. It's not a topic we often preach on, but as I've studied it, I've come to see how personally relevant it is to my life and yours.

Let me tell you where we're going in this article, for those of you who are taking notes. We'll begin by

1. DEFINING THE PROBLEM OF UNCERTAINTY, then we'll
2. EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF UNCERTAINTY (how it affects us--you may be surprised how much of what we do is affected by it), and then we'll look at
3. HOW FAITH LIVES WITH UNCERTAINTY--drawing five pieces of advice from Ecclesiastes 11.

So first, let's DEFINE THE PROBLEM OF UNCERTAINTY...

1. LET'S DEFINE WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT...

Here's a working definition "Uncertainty is the awareness that some of my best efforts will fail, and some of what comes into my life will hurt"..

Definition

Uncertainty is...

...the awareness that many of my best efforts

will fail, and many of life's experiences will hurt.

There are two aspects to this, they're illustrated by this little diagram. The stick figure is you. The arrow coming at you represents those things that come upon you in life and you have no control over--you lose your job due to corporate budget cuts, you get hit by a car, you catch the flu. The arrow coming from you represents those things that you attempt in life, but whose outcome is beyond your control, you can't get into the job you want, your investments fail. We all face these two types of uncertainty in life. It's a little bit like Nintendo. The difference is, in the game, the uncertainty has no real consequences. People enjoy uncertainty when it has no real consequences. But in real life, the consequences are real .

So we've said that "Uncertainty is the awareness that some of my efforts will fail, and some of life's experiences will hurt". That's uncertainty...we all know this, feel it, and it affects us deeply. Now let's look at THE IMPACT OF UNCERTAINTY ON SOCIETY and on INDIVIDUALS...

II. THE IMPACT OF UNCERTAINTY

1. We don't often think about uncertainty. They don't make big coffee table books on the subject. Dan Rather rarely features it. Yet as modern psychologists and anthropologists have studied society, they've found that one driving force BEHIND many of our practices is the fear of uncertainty and a need to feel it's under control. In fact, you can safely say that avoiding uncertainty rules much of our lives as individuals and as a society. Societies uses various institutions to protect people from uncertainty, for example ...

In Our Society, we use various things to help ourselves deal with uncertainty...

1. Technology

To protect us from the uncertainty of our environment.

2. Law

To protect us from the uncertainty of others behavior.

3. Religion

To protect us from uncertainty about life and death.

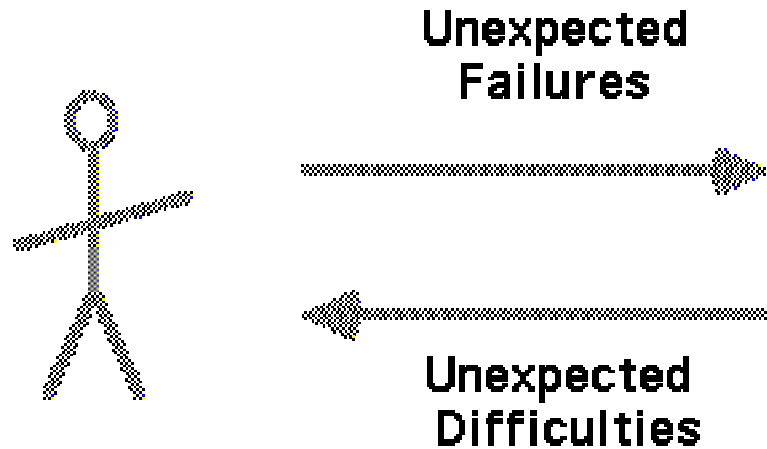
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1. Technology...in Western Civilization, we use technology to protect ourselves from the uncertainties of our environment. We build dams to reduce the threat of flooding, we install fire alarms reduce the danger of fire while we sleep, satellites help us predict storms.

2. Law...Our culture has a long tradition of law and the legal system, which we use to protect us from the uncertainties of other people's behavior. If someone threatens you or seems out of control who do we call? The police--we even call them "The Lawmen"....they come to enforce the laws that protect us.

3. Religion...Whether they're true or untrue, religions help us to protect our anxious minds from the uncertainties of life and death. People have always found death a scary thing, it raises questions, doubts, shakes us to the core--religion among other things is used to reduce the sense of doubt. Most religions around the world include elaborate systems of moral behavior to help reduce the sense of uncertainty about life and death. Common among religions is the concept of an angry demanding God, who requires lots of effort to please.

Religions based on works keep people busy working--trying to reduce the risk of rejection by God. That's how Uncertainty affects us at the societal level. Its effects are even more dramatic on an individual level...



2. You and I work hard to reduce our uncertainty. Many of the things we do to reduce uncertainty are so much a part of our lives we don't know why.. But ask us to do them another way, and we get the jitters. Our familiar way helps us avoid a sense of uncertainty that makes us feel out of control.

For Example, uncertainty can affect:

In Our Individual Lives...Uncertainty affects:

The goals we choose

The way we work

The way we handle money

The way we relate to others

The way we parent

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- The goals we choose...fear of failure may make us choose to be overly cautious and to hold back from things we'd really like to do.
- The way we do our work...During college I developed a certain way of preparing to take a test, if I couldn't prepare that way, I'd feel great uncertainty. ...When I prepare to preach, I go about it a certain way and have certain steps I'm used to going through. Some of them are just to reduce my fear of going blank.
- The way we use money...those of you whose parents lived through the depression know how many in that generation chose to approach life in a very cautious way...pinch pennys, never replace anything if it's not broken.
- The way we parent...We're parents of a 2 year old. Uncertainty rules our lives. I always used to wonder why you don't see parents of 2 year olds in so many public places. Now I know. It's because we fear the risk of total embarrassment in front of hundreds of people Last Monday we took our daughter Charissa to the library. My wife had to get some books for her third grade class, so I was "on duty". As soon as mom's out of sight, it turns out Charissa feels the urge to run all over pulling out books saying "What's THIS book?", "What's THISS book?", "What's THISSS book?". So I decided to pick her up and carry her, to stop the systematic unshelving of the library. But as I carried her, the green helium filled balloon tied to her wrist by a string keeps hitting me in my face. Finally, I decide to walk her to the car. On the way out, a mother says, "Oh Daaaddy, we're missing a shoe". Sure enough, Charissa's shoe is not on her foot, and nowhere to be seen. So I pick Charissa up and as I do I mutter "Oh Shoot!" as I begin the search and retrieve pattern for the shoe (all while carrying her and receiving repeated bops from the balloon). She now realizes that she has lost a shoe and begins to repeat, "Oh Shoot!, Oh Shoot!, Oh Shoot!". The entire library is watching my adventure in parenting. When we get back to the car, my wife can't understand why I look so worn out.

3. BY THE WAY, FAMILIAR WAYS ARE NOT ALWAYS BETTER... As I said, our familiar ways may not necessarily be better. They may just make us feel better...For example, Dr. James Dobson Many of our habits act as security blankets.

4. Unhealthy responses to Uncertainty....Here are a few examples of what may not

be the best responses to uncertainty we face...

Unhealthy Responses to Uncertainty

Stand Still

Run Like Crazy!

Walk Like Crazy!

Jump in Place

"Escape" to a new life!

Go Shopping!

Eat!

Turn Off Your Emotions

Give in to Your Emotions

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So what have we seen so far? We've seen that uncertainty affects us all, individually and as a society. All of this raises the question, how should we respond to the problem.

III. ANSWER: LIVE BY FAITH...

The basic Biblical answer is, Faith. God calls us to respond by living by faith.

There's a lot of fuzzy thinking about faith. Many people think faith means wishing really hard for something to happen. That's not it.

1. Let's remind ourselves what faith is before we dig into our passage. The closest thing we have to a one verse definition in the Bible is Hebrews 11:1 It says, "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."....Now based on this, let me give you a practical working definition of faith, ready?: Faith means choosing to see God first, and my circumstances second. Choosing to see God first and my circumstances second. It means I choose to view my circumstances through the grid of what I know about God Himself, based on the Scriptures. It's an attitude whereby I choose a correct view of who God is, that enables me to have a correct view of life.

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2. To make this clear, let's illustrate this definition of faith. How many of you wear glasses? Of those, how many are near sighted? OK, Nearsighted people see close things better than far off things. Now, the Bible says we all have a tendency to be nearsighted, that is, we focus on ourselves and our circumstances rather than on God Himself. Now, faith is the corrective lens I need to keep things in perspective.

3. Faith is like a pair of corrective lenses, which, when I put them on, I see God first, and my circumstances second. God in the foreground, everything else in the background. When I take off the corrective lens, guess what? God goes out of focus. Circumstances dominate my perspective. All I can see is ME, MY PROBLEMS, and LIFE'S UNCERTAINTY. Faith is seeing God first, my circumstances second.

So, how does a person who views life this way respond to uncertainty? We get at least part of the answer in Eccl 11. I believe it describes how a man or woman of faith approaches uncertainty. What kinds of choices does the man or woman of faith make in a risky world? Should we stand still and cover our faces, or run away? What should we do with our limited energy and resources? The Wise Teacher recommends five choices as we face uncertainty....

III. Five Choices of Faith.....

Let's look at the five choices the writer of Ecclesiastes recommends...

How to Deal with Uncertainty:

Choose to...

1. Invest Your Resources Deliberately.
2. Share Generously.
3. Don't Procrastinate.
4. Don't Strain Your Brain.
5. Don't Give Up.

1st. CHOOSE TO INVEST YOUR RESOURCES DELIBERATELY. V1 *"Cast your bread on the surface of the waters, for you will find it after many days.*

A. If life is so uncertain, what should I do with what little I've got (this can apply to finances, to energy, to time, to ability)? The phrase "Cast your bread upon the waters" apparently refers to the ancient shipping trade. A person who wanted to invest and make money had to send whatever they had to sell on a boat that took three years to return ship and bring a profit. It took a combination of boldness and patience to wait it out. He says, invest deliberately.

B. Our natural reaction is to plant little or nothing for fear of losing it. To sit on what we have so we don't lose it. "If I plant this bag of seed the birds might eat it all and I'd have nothing left", "If I spend time & money going to college and can't get a job, I'll feel I've wasted my effort." The wise Teacher advises us against the temptation to hold back out of fear. he counsels us to move forward with what we have. He's not calling us to wild speculation, but he's saying "USE IT!" , don't sit on it Choose to invest with patience and boldness and trust.

C. In the New Testament we see the same warning about holding back in the parable of the Talents, recall two servants invested the money entrusted to them, one buried it and chose a "no risk" route. He was rebuked for overcaution.

The Teacher says, Invest Boldly. Secondly,

2. The Teacher's second piece of advice is to CHOOSE TO SHARE GENEROUSLY. *V2 "Divide your portion to seven, or even to eight, for you do not know what misfortune may occur on the earth. "*

A. This verse apparently refers to the person who may already give some to others, but it urges that person to give beyond what feels comfortable. Faith doesn't hoard everything and protect everything for self.

B. Our natural reaction to uncertainty is to share little or nothing with others, or to share only what's easy and painless. Fear of uncertainty tends to make us preoccupied with our own needs. Will there be enough resources for ME and my family. Faith says, I can't predict the future, but while I have resources I'll make a point to share with others. Notice, "divide to 7, to 8"...When I think I can help maybe seven people, God says go for eight. Faith stretches to help others. I don't know about you, but it seems to me like when a person sees a need and gives, there's something freeing about it. It says that money is not my god...the dollar is NOT almighty.

C. What's the motto on our American money? Nice thought! Has it ever struck you how ironic it is that we would have that on our money? In American society, money is seen as the key to protecting self from uncertainty. We talk about having a little buffer, a cushion, a safety net, something for a rainy day--all protection against uncertainty. That's not a bad thing, saving is good, but faith chooses to share even while it saves too.

3. The Teacher's third counsel to you and I for dealing with uncertainty is found in verses 3 and 4, he advises us to CHOOSE TO AVOID PROCRASTINATING. *3. If the clouds are full, they pour out rain upon the earth' and whether a tree falls toward the south or toward the north, wherever the tree falls, there it lies. 4. He who watches the wind will not sow and he who looks at the clouds will not reap.*

A. Some things are predictable, but we have no control over them (like rain from

dark clouds), some things are unpredictable (like which way a tree will fall)...in either case, if we spend all our time trying to analyze and predict what might happen, we tend to put off life and procrastinate what needs to be done. We put off sowing and reaping while we try to figure everything out.

B. When we concentrate on trying to figure out all the things that might happen, we tend to be like a deer caught in the headlights...(1987 w/Greg and Debbie) "Oh no, looks uncertain, unfamiliar. Guess I better play it safe and just stand right here until I get the whole thing figured out!" There are many times when it IS wise to pause and analyze and get more information, that's fine, but paralysis isn't.

C. Remember once in college being so intimidated by an upcoming test because of the memorization I needed to do to prepare--a whole page of little tiny print formulas. I knew if I'd just memorize this page it would help a whole lot. Finally I did it in one focused stretch. What a freeing thing to get on with life. Faith chooses to move forward and take the action that must or should be taken.

4. The Teacher's fourth word to us regarding uncertainty is, in plain english-- CHOOSE TO LIVE WITH THE MYSTERY IN LIFE....Or in plain English, DON'T SPRAIN YOUR BRAIN TRYING TO FIGURE EVERYTHING OUT. *V5 Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things.*

A. There are plenty of things we don't understand, like how the wind is going to blow or how a baby is formed in the womb. Recognize God and His work aren't always easy to explain or understand. He is beyond us.

B. [APPLY...WE LOVE TO EXPLAIN GOD...] We love to understand why. He says, don't let your desire to figure out what God is doing keep you from moving forward. Why did God allow this or that to happen to me? Why did he let circumstances prevent this or that? If only I knew, then I could always stay one step ahead of Him.

We tend to want to bolster our faith with tidy explanations of what God's doing in every situation. To become like play-by-play announcers on the acts of God. "God just did an end run around the 2 big scary linebackers! If I were Him, I'd throw a pass next play Jim, how about you?"...In the life of faith, it's good to seek to understand God, but we need to remember we are limited in our ability to explain Him and His acts. There's much left to trust.

5. The Teacher's fifth advise for living with uncertainty is, CHOOSE TO INVEST PERSISTENTLY, DON'T GET DISCOURAGED AND QUIT... *Y6 Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.*

A. The idea here is, don't let the size of the task and the uncertainty of success discourage you and cause you to give up.

B. Our natural reaction in the face of uncertainty is to get discouraged...to plant a few seeds, then look out over that huge field and say, it's hopeless, if God wants me to have results he'll have to bless these two little seeds, I don't have the motivation to plant the rest. I'll just send out one resume, if God wants me to have a job, he'll have to use that one resume. Imagine how absurd to plant only one seed in the garden. The teacher says, don't just plant half a field and say, well, a seed is a seed. Plant plenty. It seems to say, work all day and don't let your discouragement drive you out of the game. Don't just work until lunch time. Plant a full day.

Bottom Line/Conclusion: So let's wrap up. Here's a table that summarizes what we've seen in this passage. On the left is the natural human reaction to uncertainty. On the right is the appropriate response of faith. Yes--some of my efforts will fail, some of my circumstances will hurt. But faith is choosing to see God first, and my circumstances second--choosing not to focus on the uncertainty. When I choose to see God first, what does my approach to life look like? 1. I choose to Invest Boldly, 2. Share Generously, 3. Not to Procrastinate, 4. To Live with the Mystery, 5. To Keep at it. Don't Throw in the Towel.