

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Seed the Clouds

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On the morning of his 51st birthday, Jackson Brown decided to jot down some lessons that a half century of living had taught him. His friends contributed to that project and he published a little book titled 'Live and Learn and Pass It On'. It's a compendium of lessons learned by people ages five to 95, and here are a few of my favorites. Age six, I've learned that you cannot hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk. Now I've got to say this, I've learned that you can hide broccoli underneath your table if it has a ledge, but when you move hundreds of fossilized broccoli will fall out and your sins will find you out. Age 42, I've learned that if your life is free of failure, you aren't taking enough risks. Age 18, I've learned that your ACT doesn't determine the rest of your life. Age 38, I've learned that I shouldn't go grocery shopping on an empty stomach. Age 11, I've learned that if you want to get even with someone at camp rub their underwear and poison ivy, I should not have included that one, mission camp's coming up for our youth. Not a good idea. Age 51 I've learned that if you keep doing what you've always done, you will keep getting what you have always gotten.

In the 10th century BC, a King by the name of Solomon wrote a book titled Ecclesiastes. It could be subtitled, Live and Learn and Pass It On. Solomon was no ordinary king. He was a poet king, a philosopher king he was a polymath. Now, here's a little piece of Pastor Mark trivia. When I was in college, I took a class in homiletics and we had to preach a sermon that semester and I chose as my text at 1 Kings 4:29 - 34. It is King Solomon's curriculum vetay. It says that Solomon composed 3000 proverbs and 1005 songs. It says that he spoke with authority on all kinds of plants, from the great cedar of Lebanon to the tiny hyssop that grows from the cracks in a wall. I don't know why I loved that little nuance and it says that he was an expert in animals, birds, small creatures and fish. So King Solomon was a botanist, andrologist zoologist, or anthologist and ichthyologist.

Kings and Queens. Queen Sheba of Ethiopia being perhaps the most famous came from all around the world to tap his wisdom. I've got some good news. His wisdom is still on tap. Now he's most known for his Proverbs, but I'd rather like Ecclesiastes and I'll tell you why. It's an ancient book, but it reads postmodern. It strikes a metaphysical chord that resonates with millennials. This is Solomon's memoir. He's an old man at this point. He is looking back over his life and he is sharing some lessons learned and this book, it stood the test of time. You go to a wedding, and I don't know if it happened at the royal wedding, but I bet there's a 50 percent chance you are going to hear something that Solomon said. A cord of three strands is not easily broken. Go to a funeral. Good chance you're going to hear something Solomon said, a good name is better than fine perfume. And the day of death better than the day of birth. It even inspired a guy named Pete Seeger to write a song titled, Turn, Turn, Turn, which hit number one on the billboard charts on December 4, 1965.

This weekend we begin a three part series titled 'Seed the Clouds'. Now what I want to do this weekend is zoom in on one of these life lessons. You'll find it in Ecclesiastes chapter 11, verse

four. Now I'm going to read some verses around it to give context, but let me explain why this verse of scripture is so significant to me. It is not a passage of scripture to me, it's a prescription. It is a prescription for procrastinators and perfectionists. If I was a medical doctor, I would literally write Ecclesiastes 11:4 on a prescription pad and I would say pop that pill twice a day, once before breakfast, once before bed, until you finally do something about the dream that God has put in your heart.

Let me back up just a little bit and the introduction to this message is going to be longer than the message itself. I just don't want you to get nervous. But I want you to dial in on this. When you first encounter a verse of scripture, it's a theory. You could even call it a hypothesis. It's a supposition. It's a proposition. It's a starting point for investigation and experimentation, and I would suggest that you have to apply the scientific method. You have to ask questions, make observations. You have to test it. You have to experiment with it. How? Well, you study it, you meditate on it, you pray through it and then you act on it you obey it. Now, Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the Senate, former pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church said this; "I wonder what would happen if we all agreed to read one of the Gospels until we came to a place that told us to do something, then went out to do it, and only after having done it began reading again." I'll tell you exactly what would happen is kingdom would come and his will would be done. When you obey the word of God, it's no longer a theory that theory becomes reality as we put the principles into practice and God begins to deliver on his promises. We begin to download the mind of Christ. We begin to be conformed to the image of Christ who is the Word, the Word made flesh. And that's the goal, to incarnate the word of God, to flesh it out. When we don't, the hypothesis turns into hypocrisy, but when we do that hypothesis, it's going to become your testimony.

Let me give you an example. Matthew 18:18 says, "*what you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven*". I'll be honest; 20 years ago that theory was confusing. I don't even know what does that mean? And then one day I'm walking by a crack house and I hear this still small voice; 'this crack house would make a great coffee house'. And we start praying that God would give us this crack house. What were we doing? We were testing a hypothesis that God answers prayer. Now, what's interesting is the word bind is a contractual word. The way we put contracts on things in the spiritual realm is prayer. Now it's got to pass a twofold litmus test, it's got to be in the will of God and for the glory of God. But if it is, now we're praying in the authority of God. And so when we started praying for that crack house, the owner wanted a million dollars for it. The more we prayed the more the price went down, we ended up buying it for \$350,000. But here's the amazing thing we discovered afterwards that four people offer more money for it than we did, two of them real estate developers. How did we get it? I only have one explanation is Matthew 18:18; "*What you bind on Earth will be bound in heaven.*" We were praying in the will of God and for the glory of God. So yeah, I signed the contract for that piece of property in February 7, 2002. I remember it because I was at the hospital because Josiah was born the day before, but that isn't really when we put a contract on it. We put a contract on it in prayer five years before. What I'm getting at is this, 20 years ago, Matthew 18:18 was a theory. It is now reality and it's called Ebenezer's Coffeehouse.

Now, I could tell you story after story about verse after verse that we're going to focus on Ecclesiastes 11, verse four but we'll start in verse one. Here we go. "*Cast your bread on the*

waters for after many days you will find it." Now I want to underscore many days, this is not going to happen overnight. There are no shortcuts. There are no cheat codes. We overestimate what we can accomplish in a year or two, but we underestimate what God can do in 10 or 20 years. This is about long obedience in the same direction. This is about a mindset. I think our mindset, and I think part of it is because of the culture that we live in because of the technology that is at our disposal, we want things to happen at the speed of light, but things don't happen at the speed of light they happen at the speed of a seed planted in the ground that has to take root before it bears fruit. See, we want to give God a Gantt Chart, right? We want to give God a deadline. We want to put him on our timeline, but it doesn't work that way. Now, I love the word *suddenly*. Do you like the word *suddenly*? I like it when good things happen *suddenly*. Listened it's Pentecost weekend and so I just thought to myself, you know, probably ought to touch on Acts 2. Do you remember what it says? It says *suddenly*. What? Well, *a sound from heaven, like the roaring of a mighty windstorm filled the house where they were sitting. And then what looked like flames of fire appeared and settled on each of them, and everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit.* It happened suddenly after praying for 10 solid days in an upper room. See, I've learned that suddenly usually happens after days and weeks and months and years of doing the right thing. And when we do that, listen, we can live with holy anticipation because God's going to show up and show us you cannot plan Pentecost. They did not wake up that morning and Peter like, okay, here's the game plan guys. We're going to upper room and there's going to be this sound and there's going to be these flames and we're going to speak in other tongues. They had no category for what was about to happen. You cannot plan Pentecost, but if you pray in an upper room for 10 days, Pentecost is going to happen.

Verse two; *"Give portions to seven, yes to eight for you do not know what disaster may come upon the land."* Now, the New Living translation says, *divide your investments among many places.* I just think it's kinda cool that Solomon was advocating diversification long before stocks, bonds, and mutual funds.

Verse three; *"If clouds are full of water, they pour rain upon the earth. Whether a tree falls to the south, to the north and the place where it falls there it lies."* I just kinda liked that like Captain Obvious. Well thank you, Solomon. You know, I mean you can't be brilliant all the time, right? Sometimes you just gotta say it like it is.

And a verse four; *"Whoever watches the wind will not plant."* Here it is. *"Whoever looks at the clouds will not reap."*

Let me jump down to verse six for the sake of time. *"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."*

In the 1940's, there was a research lab in Schenectady, New York, kind of fun to say that, it was called the House of Magic, at its peak, about 30,000 scientists doing research for General Electric. They gave us a turbo charged jet engines, they gave us a transoceanic radio, they gave us portable x rays, but one of the most fascinating experiments was a work of a Nobel prize winning scientist by the name of Irving Langmuir and his assistant Vincent Shaffer. Now Shaffer never graduated from high school, dropped out of high school because his father got sick and he

needed to help feed the family. He enrolled in GE's apprentice program, landed a job as a drill press operator, but he had this unique knack for DIY. And so he climbed the ladder until eventually he was this Nobel Prize winning scientist's assistant. Now, this kind of fun is they shared a love for snow. And so Langmuir was the Nobel Prize winning scientists, but Vincent Shaffer, he was the president of the Schenectady Winter Sports Club. And one day they're hiking Mount Washington and Langmuir notices these clouds kind of hovering over the mountain and he makes an observation. He says, with all these clouds everywhere, there's only a flake here in a flake there. Why? I think we ought to do some more studies on that.

So Vincent Shaffer goes back to the House of Magic, he requisitions a GE freezer, he retrofits it with black velvet, he chills it to 10 degrees below freezing and he breathes into it. I think we have a picture. It's kind of cool. I want you to see this. And so he breathes into this GE freezer and he creates a cloud. Well, he started experimenting with that cloud to see if he could make it rain or make it snow winter turned to spring, spring turned to summer and it became very difficult to keep the freezer freezing. And so what he did is went and got a little bit of dry ice to freeze that freezer. And when he did, he created snow crystals and announced to the world, I know how to make snow. Now Irving Langmuir was on vacation. He came back; Vincent told him what he had done. They immediately rented a plane, got about six pounds of crushed dry ice, they took off above the cloud, seeded those clouds and eye witnesses said that the cloud almost seemed to explode. The rain it produced was visible for 40 miles. The GE Monogram, which, hey listen, it was their in house PR firm, but here's what it said. Shaffer made it snow this afternoon over Pittsfield. Next week he walks on water. Now there's so much more to this story because the third person in this triumvirate was actually Kurt Vonnegut's brother Bernard, who much of his science fiction he got from his scientist brother because he's the one who discovered that silver iodide was probably a more effective means of seeding the clouds. In 1950 New York City worst drought in about a hundred years. And so listen, there's some fuzzy math here and it's tough to quantify some of these things, but it's argued that cloud seeding in a sense saved the city. But then there are a 130 lawsuits from resort owners in the Catskill Mountains who didn't like all of the rain and so cloud seeding kinda went undercover, pun intended.

Solomon says this, whoever watches the wind will not plant, whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. You've got to be very careful. Do not try to manufacture the miracle. I've done that. Do not try to manipulate the situation. But I think that where most of us get stuck and it's true spiritually, it's true relationally, is we're waiting for God to make a move while God is waiting for us to make a move. That's going to make even a little bit more sense next week. I think maybe just maybe we need to stop looking at the clouds and start seeding the clouds and that's what we're going to talk about for the next couple of weeks. Now, there are so many ways to do this, but this weekend we'll keep it short and sweet. I want to talk about three ways to seed the clouds.

Number one, in fact, I'll give you all three. Okay? Because then you can track with me humility, positivity, generosity. Okay. Now I could talk about 17 other things but we're going to talk about those three, this weekend.

Humility. Now let, let me say something that's going to sound heretical, but I think it's true. You can be doing the will of God and God can oppose it. Well, how could God, oppose someone doing his will? Well, if you're doing the will of God, the spirit of pride, God can't bless it. He

can't favor it because his word says in 1 Peter 5, God opposes the proud. But let me flip the coin, he gives grace to the humble. And we have a little saying around here, if you stay humble and stay hungry, there's nothing that God cannot do in you or through you. Why? Because then God knows who's going to get the glory and this principal comes with a promise. I love this. Humble yourselves, therefore under God's mighty hand that he might lift you up in due time. Let me define humility. I think it was CS Lewis who said this, when in doubt it was CS Lewis. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. That's false humility. You are the apple of God's eye. You are God's workmanship. There never has been and never will be anyone like you, but that isn't a testament to you. It's a testament to the God who created you. Humility is not thinking less of yourself. Humility is just thinking of yourself less. By the way, I think it was Eugene Peterson who defined worship as interrupting our preoccupation with ourselves? By the way, if you want to seed the clouds, you give God the sacrifice of praise. You begin to praise God in those tough seasons. Something shifts in the atmosphere. That's another sermon for another day. It is all about God and his glory and humility recognizes that. And so when you operate in a spirit of humility, it seeds the clouds and you better get ready for God's glory to fall in your life. And an attitude of humility seeds the clouds.

Let me talk about number two; Positivity. This week I met with the hitting coach for the Los Angeles Dodgers who are in town playing the Nats. And we're just chatting and I asked him a question. I said, well, what's the greatest challenge that you're facing right now? He said, well, our team has lost our last six games. And then I couldn't tell him what he wanted that to change here this weekend against the Nats. But, he said the greatest challenge is maintaining positivity. And I thought, how interesting and isn't that true in the workplace, at home. Maintaining positivity is not the easiest thing. And so we got into a conversation about it and here's what I want you to hear this weekend. Positivity, it's not just like the power of positive thinking, it's not Stuart Smalley, you know, affirming thoughts. No, this is such a huge Biblical issue.

Let me ask you a question. The Israelites, what kept them out of the Promise Land? Well, they sent in these 12 spies and 10 of them brought back a scouting report and their scouting report was negative. They said, everybody who lives there is a giant and we're like grasshoppers in their eyes. It was their negativity that spread like a virus. And the next thing you know, it infected the entire nation of Israel. They want to choose a leader to take them back into slavery. It was negativity. It was 10 negative people that kept an entire nation out of the Promised Land. 10 negative people cost an entire generation. Who made it into the promise land? Two guys, Caleb and Joshua. Why? Because they brought back a positive, it was their positivity, but here's the key, based on the promises of God, they said, no, God promised it. God will deliver on his promise. Positivity is functioning out of the promises of God. Let me just say this, we begin every staff meeting at National Community Church by sharing wins. Why? Because you know what I've learned? Positivity, seeds the clouds. You've got to celebrate what you want to see more of. By the way, Losada ratio; you need two point seven compliments for every criticism. How are you seeding the clouds? Are you seeding it with negativity? Because the storm's going to come and you aren't going to like what it brings, or are you seeding the clouds with that positivity?

Number three, generosity. Now I think this goes back to verse one. It says; *cast your bread on the water*. One translation says this, *give generously for your gifts will return to you later*. In

Acts 10, there's a story about a guy named Cornelius and Italian soldier who will become the first Gentile convert to Christianity, and it seems kind of random, like of all people on Earth. Why would God choose Cornelius? I think we get a clue because Acts 10 tells us two things about Cornelius. Are you ready? He gave generously and he prayed regularly. That's all I need to know. Here is someone who was seeding the clouds with his generosity, with his prayer habit.

Let me talk for a minute about the tithes Malachi 3:10 says this, *"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house, test me in this."* And so here's the hypothesis. *"Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."* Can I tell you what the tithe is? The tithe is casting your bread on the water. It's seeding the clouds. And here's what I've learned. God can do more with 90 percent than I can do with 100 percent, and man, I love the promise attached to it. He is going to open the flood gates of heaven. Listen, it's one of the best decisions Lora and I ever made when we got married, we're going to never not tithe. And we've learned so many lessons and many of them in tough times, but I'll tell you this, the more you give the more you can enjoy what you keep, and I've learned you can't out give God.

About 10 years ago, we invited Stanley Tam. Do you remember this? The founder of the United States Plastic Corporation, I think he was only 93 at the time, I think he's 103 now, he's a young man. And he spoke and then we had dinner afterwards and I will never forget as long as I live something he said, he said, God can't reward Abraham yet. There was kind of like this pregnant pause like, and I'm wondering like what is he going to say next? God can't reward Abraham yet because his seed is still multiplying. Humility is silver iodide. Positivity is silver iodide. Generosity is silver iodide. You've got to sow your seed in the morning.

Let me come back and just share a little bit of my story and then we'll call it a wrap. When I was 22 years old, a graduate student at Trinity International University, and Lora and I were planning on planting a church there and preparing for that. One day I'm in the chapel and I'm praying and I have one of these moments where I hear the still small voice of God wasn't audible, unmistakable. I felt like God said, Mark, I want you to be a voice to your generation. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it was such a Mark moment. You don't have many moments like that. And I discerned that to mean that God was calling me to write and this was crazy for two reasons. One, I didn't read, at that point I probably read less than two dozen books not assigned by a teacher and I had just taken this graduate assessment that showed a low aptitude for writing. In other words, whatever you do, don't write. It is not a natural gifting, but God doesn't call the qualified, He qualifies the called. And so again, I'm just sharing my testimony. So here's what I did. I figured I better start reading and I did and I fell in love with reading. I read 3000 books over the next 13 years. But I didn't just read them. I reverse engineered them. What, what was I doing? I was seeding the clouds. I was sowing my seed in the morning. And so then fast forward, I start preaching sermons and I'm not good enough to just get up here and wing it. Case you haven't noticed. I have to manuscript every single word. Now, sometimes they get a little off script, but I manuscript every single word I used to think that was a curse. Turned out to be a little bit of a blessing. And so what I started doing is I started turning those manuscripts into something called e-votionals. Anybody remember those things? A devotional without the D. I thought it was pretty clever. And we would send out those emails first to a few people and then a few hundred and then a few thousand and you know, what I said was, hey, it's a double dose, you

know, you can hear it and then if I guess if you like it, you can read it or you can delete it if you want to. But it really wasn't about that. It was about me catalyzing the calling that I knew God had given me and cultivating the craft. It took a lot of work every week to do and sometimes I thought is it really worth it? And I started blogging. Why? Well, I mean because everybody was doing it, but I thought it would be a fun way for us to kinda like, hey, let's not just kind of be in each other's world. You know, on the weekend I thought, man, it'd be a fun way to seven days a week kinda in case you care, you know, what I'm doing or what I'm thinking or whatever.

But it wasn't about that. It was a daily discipline. It was about learning to write in soundbites that would punch. It was about finding my way in finding my voice, but here's the deal. Thirteen years later, still didn't have a book to show for it. I'm just keeping it real. I can't even put into words how frustrated I was. I hated, I don't even use that word. I don't want my kids to use that word. I'm gonna use it. I hated my birthday. and I'll tell you why, because every year it felt like another year and the dream is gathering dust and it just feels like it's getting further and further and I had like half a dozen manuscripts on my computer, but I just couldn't finish it. It was eating me alive and that is when I found Ecclesiastes 11:4. We'll tell you what I did. I read it and I remember the version, it was the NLT because do you remember I used to always have my metal Bible. I love my metal Bible, a metal cover Bible, but they only made it in the NLT and so I know it was NLT. Here's what it said, "*Farmers who wait for perfect weather, will never plant.*" I don't know what happened. A switch flipped. I mean at some point, enough is enough. I made a decision. I self imposed a deadline that I would not turn 35 without a book to show for it. That gave me 40 days. Now let me say this, I self published 'ID: The True You' and I'm just going to say it, it is not the best book in the bookstore. I actually tried to get it out of circulation, but I learned that once it's on Amazon, it's forever. But the next year I'd write 'In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day' and I've written 15 books since then. But it goes back to this verse, this verse changed my life and it's why when I sit down with people I know God's put a dream in your heart. I'll say to people, Listened, I don't know how you're going to get there, I don't know exactly what you need to do, but I know this, you better seed the clouds, you better sow your seed. You better pop this pill twice a day. You cannot just watch the wind. You cannot just look at the clouds as they float by. Again, don't manufacture the miracle, don't manipulate the situation, but come on, you tell me. Is it time? Is it time for you to cast your bread on the water?

I'll close with this, if I can find it. March of 1873 a guy by the name of Henry James, I think he was a Harvard psychologist, maybe, published an article in the Atlantic Monthly titled the Madonna of the Future. It was a fictionalized account of an artist who devoted her entire life to a single painting, and when that artists died, it was discovered that the canvas is blank. She never finished because she never started. That fictional story is nonfiction for a lot of people. So the 19th century historian, Lord Acton borrowed James' phrase to describe his own life's work called History of Liberty. Listen, it has been described as the greatest book never written. Daniel Boorston said this, 'always discouraged by the imperfection of the material. He always delayed his unifying work by the promise of new facts and new ideas.' If you wait until you're ready, you'll be waiting until the day you die. If you wait for perfect conditions, you will be waiting until the day you die. I know this kind of message is really dangerous, don't quit your job tomorrow, like don't pop the question tonight. But what's your Madonna of the Future? In the first century there was a saying. It's still four months until the harvest. Do you remember what Jesus said? He rebuked it, said, do not say four more months. He said, open your eyes and look

at the fields they are ripe for harvest. Delayed obedience is disobedience. Sow your seed in the morning and in the evening let not your hands be idle.

Let's pray. God, you are the Alpha and Omega and I thank you this weekend that you have good works prepared in advance, but I pray that we would have the faith to seed the clouds. God help us. Help us, especially in the city that we live. Would you help us operate in a spirit of Christ like humility? God, may we be the people who in our workplaces, our positivity, based on the promises of God, shifts the atmosphere. God, I pray that we would discover what you said, *"it is more blessed to give than to receive."* And I pray that out of a grateful heart, generosity would well up within us within this church. Lord, you know where each one of us is at in our spiritual journey. And you know what that next step needs to be. May we all, with your wisdom, with your grace, with your patients seed the clouds in Jesus' name, Amen.