

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

The Trouble With Wisdom

"Under the Sun"
Purpose
"Heart"
Wisdom
Pleasure
"God"
Wealth
"Vanity"

"I, the Preacher, have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. . . ." (1:12-18).

Have you ever wondered what you would do if you could do anything you wanted? Imagine that nothing is too expensive, too difficult, or too outrageous. What would you do? You could spend a lot of time daydreaming about that one, couldn't you?

For Solomon, it was not a dream! He had every conceivable option open to him, and *that* is what makes Ecclesiastes so interesting. He *could* and *did* try *everything* in pursuit of meaning and fulfillment for his life. One by one, he recounts for us how he explored his options, and over and over he pronounces them empty: "Vanity of vanities." It is all "a grievous task" and "striving after wind."

Oddly enough, the first option he explored and discarded is one which we might have thought would be a winner: wisdom (1:12, 16). But it, too, he pronounces "vanity."

We might ask, "What is the trouble with wisdom?"

THE TROUBLE WITH WISDOM

We need, first, to understand what Solomon is and is not talking about when he discusses "wisdom."

He is *not* talking about the wisdom that comes as a gift from God, that spiritual wisdom that James tells about:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5).

But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy (James 3:17).

It is certainly not wisdom which Solomon pronounces "vain." Rather, he is talking about *human* wisdom, "under the sun" wisdom, the kind of knowledge that we acquire for ourselves and the human reasoning with which we apply it. While knowledge and wisdom are not exactly the same thing, 1:18 makes it clear that in Solomon's mind, they are extremely closely related, if not identical: "Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain."

Perhaps Solomon discusses this option first because it is one of mankind's most cherished illusions—that our wisdom and knowledge are the ultimate answer to all of life's problems. As I was growing up, tremendous promises and presumptions were being made about education: "Education is the way to guarantee a good future"; "Good grades in high school lead to large scholarships"; "A college degree means a good job, a good income, and a happy life." People spoke as if these results were automatic, as if education guaranteed success in life. But what a sad delusion this is! As important as

education is, as valuable as the learning of the ages can be, they can leave us as empty and miserable as if we had never been to school. Last year the president of a major university was charged with and confessed to having made obscene telephone calls. This is hardly the kind of activity we would expect of an educated man! Regardless of this man's great knowledge, his grasp of human "wisdom," he was left with a tragic hole in his life.

Yet we continue to believe that education is the answer to our problems. In response to the drug problem plaguing our country, we are told that the answer is "more education" for our school-age children. But education can never be the ultimate answer to these problems because they are moral and spiritual in nature, and secular education is ill-prepared to address them and provide the answers that God alone can give. H. G. Wells wrote, "Human history (is) a race between education and catastrophe." Our educational level has increased, but the catastrophes keep overtaking us!

Human wisdom only explores what takes place "under the sun"; it does not touch our inner, spiritual lives.

Today we are particularly enamored with *technology*. Now *there* surely is the answer! In 1990 the U.S. space program sent aloft the Hubble telescope, which was supposed to bring the greatest scientific discoveries of our age and broaden our understanding of the universe in which we live. One problem: It did not work! But even if it had, would it have brought peace on earth? Would it have eliminated racial hatred? Would it have eradicated poverty and homelessness? Could a telescope—even one like the Hubble—ever cure the ills which lie deep within the human soul? To ask these questions is to answer them. If our wisdom, education, knowledge, and technology are the answer, why are we still in the mess we are in?

Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor

the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.

—John Henry Newman

Solomon is quick to admit that even such wisdom is not all bad and that it has its distinct advantages:

And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness. The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. . . . (2:13, 14).

Wisdom strengthens a wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city (7:19).

Also this I came to see as wisdom under the sun, and it impressed me. There was a small city with few men in it and a great king came to it, surrounded it, and constructed large siege-works against it. But there was found in it a poor wise man and he delivered the city by his wisdom. Yet no one remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the wisdom of the poor man is despised, and his words are not heeded (9:13-16).

In spite of its advantages, wisdom is still not the ultimate solution to man's search for meaning in life. What are the problems with wisdom?

It Is Limited

According to 1:13, 14, Solomon is thinking about those things that are done "*under the sun*," which is Solomon's phrase to describe events connected with *this* life. Human wisdom only explores what takes place "under the sun"; it does not touch our inner, spiritual lives. In other words, it gets us no nearer to God! Too, human wisdom cannot change much. Solomon says, "What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted" (1:15). Also, some things cannot be learned by human wisdom. He says,

I tested all this with wisdom, and I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. What has been is remote and exceedingly mysterious. Who can discover it? I directed my mind to know, to investigate, and to seek wisdom and an explanation, and to know the evil of folly and the foolishness of madness (7:23-25).

When I gave my heart to know wisdom and to see the task which has been done on the earth (even though one should never sleep day or night), and I saw every work of God, I concluded that man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun. Even

though man should seek laboriously, he will not discover; and though the wise man should say, "I know," he cannot discover (8:16, 17).

We must face the limitations of our own wisdom if we wish to have a realistic view of life.

Sometimes It Backfires

We may think that an increase in wisdom, or human knowledge, is the answer to our problems, but frequently an increase in knowledge only increases our difficulties:

And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain (1:17, 18).

Increases in knowledge and wisdom make us more aware of the troubles and imperfections of this world. An untrained listener may hear a concert played by an amateur musician and think it is wonderful, while a skilled musician may hear the same music and think it is awful! Musical training is a wonderful blessing, but it makes one more discerning and more aware of imperfections.

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One of Eve's motivations for eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden was the serpent's promise that it would make her wise, "knowing good and evil." She became "wise" all right, and she *did* understand good and evil—but as the victim of the evil she experienced. How much better off she and our entire human race would have been had she remained ignorant of evil!

The age in which we live has been called "The Age of Anxiety." One reason why people today experience so much anxiety is, I am convinced, that we often know more than is good for us. If you watch much television or read the newspapers, all the world's ills are paraded before your eyes daily. We now have news pro-

grams that can keep us updated on all the troubles around the globe twenty-four hours a day. Even though there is a positive side to all this information, since it makes us more sensitive to the needs of others in of the world, but our increased "wisdom" does not give us contentment.

It Is Negated by Death

As Solomon pondered the wisdom he had gained, he realized that the wise man, just like the fool, faces the ultimate disappointment of death:

The wise man's eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both. Then I said to myself, "As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?" So I said to myself, "This too is vanity." For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as in the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die! (2:14-16).

Someone has described death as "the worm at the core of all of man's pretensions to happiness." Whatever we do, however much pleasure, wisdom, wealth, etc., we gain, we cannot escape the reality of death. And human wisdom cannot resolve the death problem for us because it can do nothing about the cause of death: sin. That which fails to solve for us the problem of death solves *nothing* ultimately!

After pondering the limitations of human wisdom, Solomon found himself faced with despair and frustration: "So I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind" (2:17).

WHAT WE NEED INSTEAD OF OUR OWN WISDOM: GOD'S WISDOM

Since there are no ultimate answers to our dilemmas "under the sun," the answers must lie outside of ourselves. Thus our greatest need is for the wisdom of *God* rather than our own. First Corinthians 1:18-25 says,

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in

the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Notice verse 21: The world did not know God through its wisdom. That is the problem with it! So God revealed Himself in a way that completely circumvents human wisdom—through the cross! Rather than trying to educate us, to appeal to our human wisdom, God sent His Son to die for our sins on the cross. That message may not appeal to our human sense of logic or our thirst for the sensational, but it is the very power of God! If we are not careful, even that divinely-revealed truth will be obscured by our application of human tests of wisdom to it. Indeed, Paul said that many reject the cross because their human "wisdom" keeps getting in the way (1 Corinthians 1:22, 23).

When faced with the truth of Christ crucified, many resort to so-called "intellectual problems" about God. They ask, "If there is a God, why is there suffering in the world?"; "How could Jesus be both God and man?"; "If God answers prayers, why are all prayers not answered?" The idea seems to be that if we cannot answer all such questions, then the gospel cannot possibly be true. If the message of the cross does not appeal to our wisdom, then it cannot possibly be true (as if *we* were the standard and have all the answers).

While these are weighty questions, not having all the answers to them should not keep us from accepting the fact that Christ died for our sins and offers us eternal life. And the word of the cross may not answer all your questions, but do you have anything better upon which to base your life? Is there something that resolves your dilemmas better than the message of love, forgiveness, hope, and eternal life? If there is something better, why has this wonderful message not been spread abroad over the whole earth, as

has the word of the cross?

Does God call for a rejection of human knowledge altogether? No, God only wants us to put it in its rightful place (1 Corinthians 1:24, 25), to acknowledge that His wisdom is higher and better, and to allow Him through the message of Christ to give us what our own wisdom can never provide: peace with Him and eternal life in heaven.

CONCLUSION

Solomon explored all of his options in his search for the ultimate meaning in life. One opportunity which he did not have in his day was to know Christ, and so he found himself faced with despair and frustration.

You and I *have* that opportunity. We can know the very wisdom of God by accepting the form in which He offers it to us: His Son, Jesus Christ.

How to Live

"We are here to add what we can to life, not to get what we can from it."

William Osler

"The best use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts life."

William James

"It's better to live richly than to die rich."

"Always stand for the right; then you win even if you lose."

"No man can be at peace with God without getting into an argument with the devil."

"God asks no man whether he will accept life. That is not the choice. You *must* take it. The only choice is *how*."

Henry Ward Beecher
Life Thoughts

"Since life is so short, let's make it broader."