

## **The Futility of Man's Wisdom** **Ecclesiastes 1:12-18**

**February 28, 2016**  
**Steve DeWitt**

Last week we began a new teaching series in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. It was written by either Solomon or a pseudo-Solomon. It describes man's search for meaning apart from God between man after the fall in Genesis 3 and before Jesus' incarnation. The author's summary was in 1:2, "*Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*"

To show you that you never know what the person next to you is thinking or going through, I received a note this week from someone in our church. Ecclesiastes is part of how she came to faith in Jesus.

*"I could hardly wait all week last week to come to Bethel and get started with the new series [on] Ecclesiastes. In fact, it could also be true to say I've been waiting decades for this series: One reason being because I never have heard a series on the book of Ecclesiastes but quite another reason being the book has special meaning to me. As an unchurched, unsaved teenage girl I was at a Catholic high school basically for the quality of the education. So I owned a (Catholic) Bible....What happened when I as a very impressionable and artistically-minded teenager read Ecclesiastes was that the message of 'vanity of vanities, all is vanity' really resonated with me. I was at the same time reading the French existentialists and nihilists, so the messages all kind of combined. In the infamous words of Freddy Mercury, 'Nothing really matters. Anyone can see. Nothing really matters...to me. Any way the wind blows....' I read the book through a lens that didn't know to look forward to Jesus, so the message of Ecclesiastes depicted for me the absurd futility of existence. However, that sense of futility was rejected by some very small part of me. Something reared up and said, 'That can't be it. That can't be all there is. It simply cannot be so, that nothing really matters and all is in vain. There must be more, there must be a reason.' It took several more years for reason to enter my life, in the person of Jesus. But I knew as soon as I encountered him that here was every answer: the Way, the Truth and the Life! And everything mattered, because He is everything."*

Isn't that great? The absurdity of life led her to search for the truth and she found it in Jesus.

This provides a wonderful backdrop to our text today. Beginning in 1:12 through chapter 2, the author tries to find answers to life via avenues available in this world. Wisdom and reason. Pleasure and self-indulgence. Careful living. Work and accomplishment. Each of these he explores only to be disappointed and return to his scary conclusion: everything is futile.

*"I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted." (Ecclesiastes 1:12-15)*

The Preacher's first attempt at answers is to pursue them with wisdom. Let's first make sure we understand what wisdom he is talking about.

I think we would all agree wisdom is a good thing. The Bible has a lot to say about wisdom and most of the book of Proverbs is urging us to live wisely. Then Ecclesiastes comes along and says that wisdom is futile. Is the Bible contradicting itself?

Remember that Ecclesiastes is exploring man's pursuit of meaning in life without God. This includes the wisdom that man applies to that pursuit. It is wisdom without God. Wisdom without revelation. Wisdom whose starting point is not the fear of the Lord but the glory of man.



He says that "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." (Verse 13) Solomon brought all his mental abilities to the search for wisdom. Remember, this is no intellectual lightweight.

Let's remind ourselves of Solomon's story. Solomon was named king by his father David. God came to Solomon in a dream and said, ask whatever you want and I will give it to you. Solomon responds, "Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?" (1 Kings 3:9)

God was very pleased with Solomon's request and gave him insight and wisdom beyond anyone else. A summary of Solomon's wisdom is,

*"And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men." (1 Kings 4:29-31)*

Solomon's wisdom was divinely enabled and enhanced. He draws on this vast mental capability and searches out life's meaning from knowledge and human reason. He draws conclusions.

## Living According to Man's Wisdom

### Unhappy

*"It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with."* (Ecclesiastes 1:13) Man's wisdom didn't provide him with happiness. He thought about everything and took it to its logical conclusion and there waiting for him was depression. Man is busy, but our busyness is an unhappy business.

### Like chasing the wind

*"I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind."* (Verse 14) This is a commonly used metaphor in Ecclesiastes. Chasing the wind. Ever try to chase a piece of paper caught in the wind? To chase the wind itself would be futile.

### Impossible/maddening/exasperating

*"What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be counted."* (Verse 15) You see in your Bible how it is indented in the text. This was apparently a little proverb of the day. It was the kind of thing people would say over certain realities that just can't be fixed.

We might say, "It is what it is." Or compare it to Humpty Dumpty. Some things are broken beyond repair. All our attempts to create a utopia or fix everything with government ignore a reality. Some things can't be fixed. They are so tangled and knotted, no one can figure them out.

Can anyone fix the Israeli-Palestinian problem? Will our national debt ever be solved? Can anyone get cats and dogs to get along? Certain things in the life are like the mathematical  $\pi$ ; they cannot be solved completely. Why? Romans 8:20 says, *"For the creation was subjected to futility."* Sin twisted our world into a knot. We are all living a different part of that tangled mess.

If you have ever been fishing, you know how maddening a knot or tangle in your line can be. If it gets into your reel, you are ready to just jump into the lake yourself. Sometimes you can get it, sometimes you can't and you just have to cut the line and start over. It's so frustrating.

*"Consider the work of God: who can make straight what he has made crooked?"* (Ecclesiastes 7:13) Man can't reason his way to happiness. Man can't mathematize his way to answers. Man can't philosophize his way to nirvana on earth. All the knowledge we have about the universe still doesn't answer man's basic question, who am I?

Think of all the time you spend trying to fix your problems. Your marriage. Your finances. Your crazy sister and her family. We lay in bed and ponder answers. For the most part, it just is what it is. Knotted. Tangled. Broken. Unfixable.

*"I said in my heart, 'I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my heart has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge.' And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow."* (Ecclesiastes 1:16-18)

He tried to learn everything including wisdom's alternatives; madness and folly. He thought logically about the way of life that doesn't care about answers; doesn't try to live according to wisdom. Even those are futile like chasing the wind. This is Solomon we are talking about. He was the wisest man who ever lived. If Solomon's brain can't solve this one, neither can we.

He concludes this section by quoting another proverb, "*For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*" (Verse 18)

We have our own version of this, *ignorance is bliss*. We like to think that really smart people are taking care of our national security. Then things come out about how that is being run and the more we know the more scared we are. We like to think our place of employment is safe and sound, then we get into management and realize how fragile the whole company is. Or when you are a student everything seems great. Then you go into education and have a rude awakening your first day in the teacher's lounge. "*The wiser you are, the more worries you have; the more you know; the more it hurts.*" (Verse 18, Good News Translation)

### **Why is Man's Knowledge So Futile? No Matter How Much You Know, You Still Die**

There are many riddles to man's existence. The one that trumps them all is death. For the intellectual, death logically looms over all man's mental attainments. In the end, what good does knowledge do?

A quote I used in my book haunts me a little. I share it with you here.

*"Simone de Beauvoir, French existentialist and close associate of Sartre, looked upon her coming death, seen from her materialist position, with repulsive horror. 'I loathe the thought of annihilating myself quite as much now as I ever did', she remarked. 'I think with sadness of all the books I've read, all the places I've seen, all the knowledge I've amassed and that will be no more. All the music, all the paintings, all the culture, so many places: and suddenly nothing.... Nothing will have taken place. I can still see the hedge of hazel trees flurried by the wind and the promises with which I fed my beating heart while I stood gazing at the gold mine at my feet: a whole life to live. The promises have all been kept. And yet, turning an incredulous gaze toward that young and credulous girl, I realize with stupor how much I was gypped.'*

Thomas Dubay reflects on Beauvoir's angst: "*Refreshing honesty. Yes, for the thoughtful atheist death must loom as a crushing catastrophe. Everything good, noble, beautiful experienced throughout life is about to vanish, not simply for a week or two, not only for a century, but forever. On the atheist's premise death is a nightmare unbroken by a dawn.*" (Thomas Dubay, *The Evidential Power of Beauty*, p. 99)

Man's reason doesn't start with God or take him to God. But it does take him to death's certainty and the logical futility of knowledge in the end.

No matter how much you know, you still die. No matter how many PhDs you have, you still die. No matter how many books you read or write, you still die. No matter how much you intellectually discover and understand, you still die. Man's wisdom is twisted and cursed and cannot bring man what he really wants. Eternal conscious life.

## Why is Jesus True Wisdom?

We have to read Ecclesiastes with three eyes: one on the Fall, one on the text, and one forward to Jesus and the cross, which Scripture says is the starting point of true wisdom.

*"Where is the one who is wise? 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 did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* (1 Cor. 1:20-25)

Paul highlights why human wisdom fails us. At the root of it is human pride. Kiralee has a habit we are in the process of trying to parent out of her. When we go to put her in her car seat or some other thing, she will quickly insist, "I do it!" We like an independent spirit. But when she insists, we see another thing behind it. *I must do it myself. I do it. I think it. I solve it.* All of these flow out of man's most basic problem—the pride that must solve all our problems ourselves.

This is why the real gospel is so offensive and counterintuitive to us. It crushes human pride by not beginning with us, or our effort, wisdom, or reason. It begins with God's effort and wisdom.

### Jesus embodies the truth that mankind needs

Jesus is described in Scripture as the Word, the divine special revelation of God. *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* (John 1:14) Man's reason is always butting up against logical and philosophical gnarls. Great thinkers like Stephen Hawking search the mathematical universe for the theory of everything. What are they looking for? Truth that explains the universe.

But they never can find it because reason won't lead man to the answer. God must fill the gaps. God must cut the fishing line and restring the pole. And God has by sending his Son into this world. The Word became flesh. The answer became human.

Human wisdom wants to become the answer. But in reality, the answer becomes human.

### Jesus solves man's unsolvable riddle

Jesus addresses the Rubik's Cube of man's existence, death. He does so by cutting the line. Like the fisherman who cuts the line and ties on a new line, Jesus cuts the knot away by his death and replaces the line with new line. New life. His perfect life lived for us replaces the tangled and unsolvable knot of our sin and guilt.

The resurrection of Jesus solves what Hawking and Sartre and Nietzsche and Dawkins and Freud and Darwin and great minds of human history could never figure out. Their graves silently speak of the emptiness of human intellectual accomplishment.

Jesus was resurrected on the third day by the power of God and in his resurrection he eliminated death's ultimate and eternal claim on us. Logic cannot believe in a resurrection because it requires a supernatural act that man cannot do. But that is the gospel. It is

foolishness to the prideful and the rational mind of man but is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe.

What about you? What keeps you from believing in God's answer to the riddle of your soul? Must you do it? That's pride. God requires humility and a repentant spirit who by faith believes Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life.

Like the letter I began with, the absurdity of life without God can itself motivate us to search for an answer. It led her to Jesus. Perhaps it will lead you to him too.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Additional Scripture quotations taken from *The Good News Translation*, Copyright © 1992 by American Bible Society.

© 2016 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address ([www.bethelweb.org](http://www.bethelweb.org)) on the copied resource.