

## The Emptiness of Human Wisdom

“I the Preacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I set my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all that is done under heaven; this burdensome task God has given to the sons of man, by which they may be exercised” (Ecclesiastes 1:12, 13). There is an evident shift here from general observations about the vanity of the material world to the author’s own profound experience of this truth in the affairs of men (“all that is done under the sun”). Solomon now presses his conclusions as the result of a carefully studied effort by one of immense resources (1:12; 1 Kings 3:13) and unequaled wisdom (1:16; 1 Kings 3:12). He has learned some hard personal lessons and is determined to share them with his readers. It is a bit difficult to determine in these verses whether wisdom was the means or end of Solomon’s quest. Perhaps, in a sense, it was both. He had hoped by wise research into human affairs to find life’s meaning, the true and ultimate wisdom. The wisdom the Preacher exercises in his search is not divine, but human. It comes not by revelation but by observation and experience of life. It is limited to what a man or men can know by their own unaided skills. So the king focused all his intellectual and intuitive powers on a study of life which was both deep (*darash*, penetrating into the depth) and wide (*tur*, extensive search, “all that is done under the sun”). And no one could have done it more thoroughly. The Preacher characterizes this search for ultimate answers in the world of men and nature not only as a “burdensome task” but one that “God has given to the sons of man.” By God’s design human beings are driven not just to live but to understand the meaning of life. We are not content just to exist. As Solomon will later put it, “He has put eternity in our hearts ...” (3:11). But this agonizes us because the mystery that tantalizes our mind will not yield to its powers. And what is available for us to observe and experience in the affairs of men brings no meaning and no peace. So the Preacher concludes, “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed it is vanity and grasping for the wind” (v. 14). Like the Cynic Diogenes who went about Athens with a lantern looking in vain for an honest man, Solomon has searched for something ultimately meaningful under the sun and failed to find it. Yet if Solomon’s pursuit of final answers proved fruitless it did serve to emphasize how many things under the sun are intractably crooked and painfully absent. “What is crooked cannot be made straight and what is lacking cannot be numbered” (v. 15). He is not speaking here so much of human sinfulness as of the apparent contradictions of what is just, fair and sensible and the missing pieces that make the solving of the puzzle impossible. The reason that God’s providence is often so indecipherable arises both from our own limited knowledge and the fact that God Himself has clouded the face of creation by subjecting it to vanity because of human rebellion (Romans 8:20). The world that baffled Solomon was not the world that God had originally created. The Preacher’s failure to find peace in wisdom is but a powerful demonstration of Paul’s declaration that “in the wisdom of God the world through wisdom did not know God” (1 Corinthians 1:21). God, then, has so arranged things under the sun that however much we try to know the infinite mind of deity we cannot. It is a recurrent theme in Ecclesiastes (3:11; 7:23; 8:16, 17). The mind of man cannot penetrate the mystery of God’s purpose (Romans 11:34). Human philosophy, the effort to do so, has always been a function of human pride (James 3:13–15). Like two-year-old children we deny all need of help and stubbornly try to take care of everything for ourselves no matter the awful mess we make of it. True wisdom, not of this world, comes down from God, as might be expected (James 3:17, 18; Daniel 2:20–22), but it will only come to those who humbly confess their ignorance and foolishness (1 Corinthians 3:18, 19). Solomon’s quest humbled him. Unfortunately it does not do the same for all. The Preacher muses as he brings the chronicle of his search for wisdom under the sun to a close (Ecclesiastes 1:16, 17). He remembers that he had brought to the task greater resolve, skill and understanding than any before him and yet his failure was still absolute. Lesser men should take note that “... in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow” (Ecclesiastes 1:18). But we are slow to learn. We still dream of penetrating the immense mind of God with our small minds (Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, p. 175). The irony is that we struggle futilely to learn what He is freely telling all who have the humility to listen (Ephesians 3:8, 9).

Paul Earnhart  
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# West Ventura County church of Christ

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## February 26, 2017

We would like to welcome you to our assembly!

### Men serving today:

#### Announcements:

Dale Moffet

#### Leading Lord's supper:

Dale Moffett

#### Song Leader:

Kalvin Johns

#### Scripture reading:

Psalms 101

Tim Giles

#### Closing prayer:

Roberto Gutierrez

### Sunday morning adult class:

Exodus

#### Sermon:

Psalms 101

Derrick Victor

#### 5pm Evening Sermon:

John Adams

### Join us again next week!

#### Morning Bible class:

Exodus

#### Morning sermon:

Romans 8

Derrick Victor

#### Evening sermon:

TBD

“I will sing of lovingkindness and justice,  
To You, O LORD, I will sing praises.

<sup>2</sup>I will give heed to the <sup>1</sup>blameless way.

When will You come to me?

I will walk within my house in the integrity of  
my heart.

I will set no worthless thing before my eyes;

I hate the <sup>1</sup>work of those who fall away;

It shall not fasten its grip on me.

A perverse heart shall depart from me;

I will know no evil.”

(Psalms 101:1-4)

## Prayer Requests

- Jewell Marshall has been sick please pray for her recovery to full health.
- Cassie Hough will have knee surgery in April.
- The Morrows continue to need prayers concerning their health.
- Lamar is recovering from knee surgery.
- Ann Joseph is stronger but still in need of prayers.
- Chris and Janelle Myers have officially adopted their two foster children. Please pray for the Lord's guidance in raising these sweet children.
- Spring gospel meeting with Harris Waterman, March 30 – April 2.