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Wisdom is Pointless Ecclesiastes 1: 12-18

Wisdom is pointless DIG: Where has the Teacher searched for wisdom? What is the “burden” in verse 13? Why is God blamed for it? Why does wisdom bring sorrow and knowledge bring grief? How is chasing after the wind, like failing to grasp the meaning of life under the sun?

REFLECT: Sooner or later, most people who wrestle with the big questions in life end up getting discouraged or depressed. Where “under heaven” have you searched for meaning? Where have you found it? In what instances has knowledge caused you sorrow?

All our learning is pointless without God.



After introducing the author and stating the theme, **Ecclesiastes** offers a series of examples taken from nature and human experience to prove that all our efforts on this earth are fleeting and **pointless** (**to see link click [Cc - The Failure of Earthly Things](#)**). These verses come from someone who refers to **the Teacher** in the third person - perhaps the book’s final editor. Then, starting in **verse 12, the Teacher** speaks for **himself** and invites us on a spiritual and intellectual quest: **I, the Teacher, have been king over Isra’el in Jerusalem.**

I wisely applied myself to seek out and investigate everything done under

heaven. What a bothersome task God has given humanity to keep us occupied (1:12-13)! Solomon's quest was sincere. **He** devoted **his** heart and soul to knowing the truth, leaving nothing out. **He** wanted to **investigate** every area of human endeavor, **everything done under heaven**, a synonym for **under the sun**, cutting **God** out of the picture.

Understand that the kind of **wisdom the king** was pursuing was not godly **wisdom**, but human **wisdom** - the best that human beings have said or thought without special revelation from **ADONAI**. This is a worthy pursuit, as far as it goes. All truth is **God's** truth, wherever it may be found. Because **YHVH** created the world and everything in it, any truth that we discover is a divine gift: **ADONAI gives wisdom; from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:6)**. The question, however, still needs to be asked: how far will human **wisdom** take us? Will information bring transformation? Can it lead us to eternal life?

One way to answer these questions is to see the result of **Solomon's** quest. What did he discover? The reality is that he came up empty. **Verses 13 to 15** summarize **Solomon's** unhappy efforts to understand the universe. **His** mood is unmistakably gloomy: **What a burdensome task God has given humanity to keep us occupied (1:13)!** Sooner or later most people end up feeling the same way. There are many **burdensome** things in life that make us feel unhappy: the bad relationship our parents have, the unkind comments people make about us, the things we do not have but wish we did, the recognition we deserve but never get - even the ordinary frustrations of daily life can make us feel unhappy.

When **Solomon** talks about the **bothersome task**, **he** has in mind **his** very quest to understand the meaning of life. The pursuit of **knowledge itself** is what turns out to be so **pointless**. The longer **he** looked for answers and the harder **he** tried to understand the meaning of life, the more frustrated **he** became with all of life's unanswerable questions.²⁴⁴

Chasing after the wind: After going everywhere and looking at everything **Solomon** reached this conclusion: **I have seen all the activities that are done under the sun, and it's all pointless** (Hebrew: *hebel*), **like chasing after the wind (1:14)**. Just as one cannot grasp the wind, so one cannot grasp the meaning of life **under the sun**. Meaning may be there but it cannot be grasped - it is like chasing after the wind - and the enigmas cannot be reconciled.²⁴⁵

The Teacher-king now explains why he was so frustrated. So **he** concluded the first stage of **his** unhappy quest with a proverb: **What is crooked can't be straightened; what is not there can't be counted (1:15)**. No matter how much **he** pondered the world's problems **under the sun**, **he** could not **straighten out** life's anomalies, nor reduce all that **he** saw into a neat, tidy system. Frustration and perplexity surrounded **Solomon** and all **his wisdom**, while it might help in some things, could not solve the fundamental problems of life.²⁴⁶ The thrust of the verse is that there is something fundamentally wrong with **life under the sun**, and since the world, as it is, has come about as a result of **God's** will, there is absolutely nothing that humans can do about it.²⁴⁷

The quest continued: So, **Solomon's** first test failed. Human **wisdom** could not provide an answer for the meaning of life. However, that didn't mean **he** was ready to give up. He had a little heart-to-heart talk with **himself**, a running dialogue about what **he** had discovered. **He said to himself, "Look, I have acquired much wisdom, more than anyone ruling Jerusalem before me." Yes, I experienced a great deal of wisdom and knowledge (1:16)**. Still, the **Solomon of Ecclesiastes** had not yet considered the claims of morality, so **his** quest was incomplete. **He** had tried to learn everything **he** could, like someone who goes to college and reads all the great books. However, **He** had not yet fully investigated the difference between right and wrong, or tried to find meaning and purpose by becoming a better person. **Solomon** tells us that **he** studied both **wisdom and knowledge** and **madness and folly** without saying why **he** studied both. Perhaps he looked for meaning or pleasure in one or the other. Perhaps he studied both in order to differentiate **wisdom** from the crazy **foolishness** of disobedience to **ADONAI**. Or perhaps he was attempting to be truly objective, or to get the full picture since **wisdom** and **foolishness** are two sides of the same coin.²⁴⁸

What was the result of **Solomon's** renewed quest? Did knowing the difference between right and wrong help **him** find purpose in life? Was **he** able to become a better person? Not at all. Traditional morality also failed to satisfy **his** soul. **He** said: **I came to see that this too was merely chasing after the wind**. Then **he** offered another proverb to summarize what **he** had discovered: **For in much wisdom is much grief; the more knowledge, the more suffering (1:17-18)**. So long as **wisdom** is restricted to the realm of **under the sun**, it sees the throbbing clamor of creation, life scurrying around in its ever-repetitive circles, nothing more.²⁴⁹

A hopeful conclusion: As usual, reading **Ecclesiastes** quickly makes us feel even worse about life than we did before. At first, **the Teacher's** honesty may seem refreshing, but the more we study the book, the more depressing it can become. This actually means **Solomon** is achieving his purpose. Remember that **he** is showing us the world from a merely earthly perspective - the best thinking that human beings can do on their own.²⁵⁰ **Solomon** believes in **God**, of course, and mentions **Him** by name in **verse 13**, but **he** made **his** spiritual quest essentially without **God's** help. **The Teacher** did not pray or consult Scripture, which had been the cause of **his** downfall in the first place (see **Bx - Solomon's Wives**). Instead, **he** was off and running on **his** own quest for meaning without stopping to consider **His** majesty. **He** was probing into matters by **his** unaided and unenlightened reason **under the sun** apart from any **wisdom** from **God** who dwells **above the sun**.

If we take a secular perspective and try to understand the world on our own terms rather than on **God's** terms, we will never escape **Ecclesiastes 1**. Study all the philosophy, research all the religion and pursue all the personal improvement that you please - it will still end in frustration. Human reason can only take us so far. All our learning is pointless without **God**.

But, thank **God** that there is a **God**, and that **He** does not leave us in despair! The **Solomon** of **Ecclesiastes** shows us the need for a **Savior**. **The Teacher** didn't know it yet, but at the end of all our questioning **ADONAI** will be waiting for us in **the Person** of **His** own **Son**. The Bible says that **YHVH** rewards people who truly **seek Him**. **And without trusting, it is impossible to please God, because whoever approaches Him must trust that He does exist and that He becomes the Rewarder to those who seek Him out (Hebrews 11:6)**. And that if we lack **wisdom**, we can ask **God** and **He** will give it to us: **Now if any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives to all generously and without finding fault, and it will be given to you (James 1:5 NIV)**. **Yeshua Messiah - He Himself, in His own Person - is the wisdom of God (First Corinthians 1:24)**.

We should not leave **Ecclesiastes 1** without remembering that **Yeshua** entered into all the pointlessness and frustration of life **under the sun** to show us the wise way to live. If we follow **Messiah** and **His** wisdom we will not try to bend what is **crooked** back to our own purpose, but humbly submit to the way **ADONAI** wants things to be, just as **Yeshua** did when **He** went to the **crooked** cross and died for our sins (**First Peter 2:21-24**).



If we follow the wisdom of **Messiah**, eventually life will add up. It will never add up to something simple on this side of eternity. But if we leave the final calculations to **Him**, **He** will make sure that all the books are balanced in the end, including our personal account, which **He** has reconciled with **His** own blood. Our current frustration will not last forever, including all our struggles to understand the meaning of life. Soon, our sorrows will be over. We will be with **Yeshua** forever, and find the answers to all our questions in **Him**.²⁵¹