

Is There Wisdom in Wisdom? by Jeff Strite

Ecclesiastes 1:12-2:16

TITLE: Is There Wisdom In Wisdom? TEXT: Ecclesiastes 1:12-18/2:12-16

The average public library has between 10,000 to 15,000 books on its shelves.
(http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/50441)

During the War of 1812 (between England and America), the British invaded Washington D.C. and burnt much of it to the ground... including the Library of Congress with its 30,000 books. After the war was over, Congress purchased Thomas Jefferson's personal library – 6487 books – to restart that library.

Nearly 6500 books.

That's a lot of books for one man to own.

But those collections pale in comparison to that of Abdul Kassem Ismael in the 10th century. He was the grand-vizier of Persia – and a very wealthy and educated man - and he had a library that consisted of 117,000 volumes (more likely scrolls rather than the bound books we have today).

Abdul loved his books so much that even when he traveled (and he traveled a lot) he never parted with them.

How did he do that? Well, he used about 400 camels which were loaded with his library, and these camels that were trained to walk in alphabetical order so that he could obtain the volumes he wished at a moment's notice.

(Readers' Digest, June 1981, p. 16)

Down through the ages, knowledge and wisdom have been highly prized by civilized men. And the mark of wisdom – for many people – has been the number of books they possessed.

But Solomon's wisdom wasn't measured by the number of books he owned.

His wisdom was measured by how much he wrote... and how much he knew.

According to I Kings 4:

"He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five.

He spoke about plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls.

He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish.

From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom." I Kings 4:32-34

Amongst those who came to hear his wisdom was a particular Queen you may have heard of. Do you remember her name? (The Queen of Sheba)

She traveled nearly 1500 miles to present Solomon with gifts and to ask him hard questions to discover just how "wise" he was. She was so shocked by how well he answered that she said:

"I did not believe what they said until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half the greatness of your wisdom was told me; you have far exceeded the report I heard."
(II Chronicles 9:6)

Now, if I were to say the name "Solomon" what would be the first word that would come into your mind? (WISDOM) That's right, and that's because Solomon was so wise that, to this day, his name has been forever associated with wisdom.

So, it's a bit odd to read what Solomon wrote in the passages we read this morning.
"... I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."
(Ecclesiastes 1:17-18)

"Then I thought in my heart, 'The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?' I said in my heart, 'This too is meaningless.'"
(Ecclesiastes 2:15)

And after spending a great deal of time focusing on the shortcomings of wisdom Solomon writes "Therefore I hated life..." Ecclesiastes 2:17

But now - wait a minute.
Solomon was supposedly the wisest man that ever lived.
In fact... who gave Solomon his wisdom?
That's right God did.

In I Kings 3:5-13 we read this:

"At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, 'Ask for whatever you want me to give you.'

Solomon answered, 'You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?'

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, 'Since you have asked for this & not for long life or wealth for yourself, NOR have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have NOT asked for — both wealth and honor — so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings.'"

So... God was pleased that Solomon preferred Wisdom over wealth and honor. In fact, God was so pleased with Solomon's choice gave Solomon gave him ALL 3 gifts

Throughout Scripture, Godly wisdom is more highly prized than all the other honors a man or woman could receive. And that is because God is ALWAYS pleased with those who seek HIS wisdom.

So God is pleased by Solomon's desire for wisdom and apparently... and apparently, so was Solomon. Solomon wrote most of the book of Proverbs (to his son), and in the 1st few chapters he repeated this theme: "Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.

Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you."
(Proverbs 4:6-8)

(PAUSE)

So... what's going on here?

Why would Solomon be so driven to convince his son of the value of wisdom in one book (Proverbs) and then turn around in Ecclesiastes and tell us how worthless wisdom is?

Well. before we answer that question (and I do have an answer for that question) let's first examine why wisdom is such a valuable commodity to begin with. I'm not going to quote all the Bible passages that back up wisdom's benefits but here are just a few of the advantages of God's wisdom. We'll leave these references on the screen long enough for you to write them down if you wish.

- If you have GOD's kind of wisdom you learn to be peaceful, considerate, full of mercy, and sincere (James 3:17). And because of that, even your enemies will be at peace with you (1 Kings 5:12; Prov. 16:7)
- If you have GOD's kind of wisdom you learn to fear God and shun evil (Proverbs 3:7). And because of that you tend to avoid physical danger and harm (Proverbs 13:20)
- If you have GOD's kind of wisdom you learn to give good advice... and help others in making wise decisions (I Kings 3:16-28). And because of that, people begin to want your opinion/advice (I Kings 4:34)

Now, we're talking God's kind of wisdom here.

So, where would you get God's kind of wisdom?

From God of course.

In 1 Kings 10:24 we're told that "The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart."

And that opportunity wasn't just limited to Solomon. James 1:5 promises us: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault..."

So we have the same promise Solomon had.

We can have access to the wisdom of God.

But... does that mean that people outside of God (the ungodly) aren't wise?

No. In fact the Bible often talks about the wisdom of this world.

ILLUS: I have thousands of illustrations in my files, and many of them contain thoughts and statements from non-Christians. And many times they have some pretty interesting things to say.

However, at its best worldly wisdom is always going to fall a little short of Godly wisdom? Why? Because human wisdom has a lower set of standards.

ILLUS: Have you ever gone into Wal-Mart and visited the Electronic Department? Have you ever seen the wide variety of TVs they have on display? You'll see TVs for \$100 or \$200 or \$300. And then on the back wall you see TVs for 1500 or \$1600. Now of those two price ranges of televisions, which would you think would be the better TV? The more expensive? But the lower priced TVs give you a picture... just like the high priced models? Why would we think that the high priced would be better? Well, because we're pretty sure we'll get what we pay for!!! Yes, the lower price model will get you a picture, but the standards of quality in those lower end TVs are... lower. They are either more cheaply built, won't last nearly as long, have smaller screens... or whatever. The standards are lower, and so the TV is cheaper.

The same is true in the difference between human wisdom and Godly Wisdom. Human wisdom is based on lower standards. And what is that standard? Man is the standard.

As Bette Midler once said "I have my standards. They may be low, but I have them."

Most folks make their judgments based on their own level of morality. They'll either say "I'm just as good as (that person over there)" Or, they'll say "I'm better than (so and so)" What's the standard in those statements? ME! I AM!

By contrast God tells us that His standards are higher than that. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." Isaiah 55:9

Why are God's standards higher than ours? Because Scripture tells us we don't measure up to God. Romans 3:23 says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Who's "glory" is it that is the standard? God's glory.

That's why – when God challenged Solomon to set his life on the right path, God didn't ask him to walk in the ways of his father David. Nor did he ask him to walk in the ways of Moses.

God says to Solomon: "...walk before ME in integrity of heart and uprightness..."
Walk according to GOD'S standards.

So Godly wisdom is better than human wisdom.
But what exactly does Godly wisdom look like?

James 3:13-17 says it this way: Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. BUT if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

What's he saying?

He's saying that the mark Godly wisdom is that we are pure, peace-loving, considerate, etc. When you see those traits in a Christian, you've got a pretty good idea that they've tapped into God's wisdom.

By contrast, if you find a Christians who is hard to get along with, argumentative, picking fights, putting others down... that person is not showing God's kind of wisdom.

Have you ever seen a Christians who's been like that? Of course you have. And I don't care if you're a Sunday School Teacher/Elder/Deacon/Preacher, if you act like that you are not wise.

ILLUS: Years ago, when I was in High School I was part of our church's Bible Bowl Team. We drove down to Dallas, Texas to go to the North American Christian Convention (a convention of our independent congregations) and to compete in the national Bible Bowl. We were caravanning there in 3 cars, and I was driving the family car with dad in the front seat. In the car in front of us was our youth leader - a prominent lady in our church. At the time, the speed limit was either 70 or 75 mph, but our youth leaders was intent on driving much faster than that. She was driving along at somewhere around 85 or 90 mph. That made dad a bit nervous and told me to slow down and not try to keep up with her. And that was a good thing too, because there "eyes in the sky"... and I'm not just talking about God's.

The State police had a helicopter up there noting the speeders and having police cars pulling them over. One of those they pulled over was our youth leader. Dad pulled up behind them and got out of our car. He overheard the police radio as a voice said "not that green car (ours), they weren't speeding.

Dad watched as the policeman wrote out the ticket and gave it to our lady. She apparently viewed this as a speed trap and in her anger, she tore up the ticket and threw it on the ground.

Dad said the policeman turned all kinds of shades of red, pulled her out of the car, hand-

cuffed her and drove her off to jail where there was little doubt she was going to spend the next few days. Only some serious talking on our part kept her from being jailed and eventually we were allowed to go on our way.

Now... was that woman showing the wisdom of God?

Was she being peace-loving/considerate/submissive/full of mercy.

Heavens no!

What she did was wrong in so many ways.

And I learned, at that early age, it doesn't matter WHO you are. If you behave badly – that reflects poorly on your God. And you show that you don't have the wisdom of God.

So - let's review:

- * Godly wisdom has all kinds of benefits
- * If we want His wisdom – that pleases God
- * God's wisdom is better than man's wisdom
- * And it calls us to a higher standard of integrity and honor

Now let's return to my original question:

Why was Solomon be so down on wisdom here in Ecclesiastes?

Well Ecclesiastes is one long involved commentary on life.

And Solomon has an agenda in this book.

He starts out talking about things that are desirable in this world. Things like

o Wisdom

o Pleasure

o Success

o Wealth (and more)

And he points out that all those things are good in their own way.

But at the end of his discussion on all those "desirable things" he says

It's all vanity... it's empty... it's worthless.

And he starts out focusing on the one gift for which he was known: wisdom.

His intention here is to show that wisdom – without God – is vain and empty.

And down through the ages – some of the most educated and worldly wise have agreed with him

• H.G. Wells said at age 61: "I have no peace. All life is at the end of the tether."

Wells' final literary work has been aptly called "a scream of despair."

• The immortal (and immoral) poet Lord Byron said, "My days are in yellow leaf, the flowers and fruits of life are gone, the worm and the canker, and the grief are mine alone."

• Bertrand Russell, a prominent atheist in the past century wrote these words:

"Brief and powerless is man's life, on his and all his race the slow, sure doom falls, pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass

through the gates of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.”

Isn't that cheerful thought?

These were prominent, intellectual giants in their day. Their writings summed up much of the wisdom of men in their day. And yet, for all the wisdom they thought they had... their lives were empty.

WHY?

Because wisdom – without God - eventually gets boring.

Wisdom without God becomes empty and worthless.

About this point in my sermon preparation I got stuck.

I had no idea where to go from here.

When that happens I realize I need to get back to the text and find out what I've missed.

And that's what I did. And when I did I discovered the most intriguing statements about wisdom:

“...with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”

AND

“... Like the fool, the wise too must die!”

In other words, wisdom alone cannot spare you sorrow or grief.

And wisdom by itself cannot spare you from death.

Wisdom has a great many advantages.

But without God there is little to protect us from the despair and the fears of life... and from the fear of death.

Even the wisest man faces sorrow and despair.

Even the wisest men die!

At this point in the sermon I remembered a Bible verse I'd run across earlier in the week. That verse talked about wisdom in a unique way, but I couldn't think of how it could possibly fit into this sermon... but I copied it and pasted it into a "Word" document that I had set aside for scriptures I might use.

Then suddenly, reading what Solomon wrote about despair and death, that verse that I'd thought meant nothing to this sermon... summed exactly what needed to be said.

And that verse?

“Christ Jesus... has become for us WISDOM from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” I Corinthians 1:30

Jesus is our Wisdom?

Yes, because it is in Jesus that gain the wisdom of God to deal with our despair, and the wisdom to deal with our fear of death. In Jesus, God has given us the power to face what

we could never face without Him.

This world is harsh and cruel and difficult to handle at times, but in Jesus we have the power of redemption and resurrection.

CLOSE: Over 20 years ago, when I was serving a different church, I knew a man named Karl Klostermeier. He was a preacher in nearby congregation who was told he had cancer. It was inoperable... and he was going to die.

One day he called me and asked what the Bible said about suicide. There are times when I'm not very smart, and that was one of those days. I thought he was just asking a doctrinal question, but he wasn't. He was considering it.

I don't know if I was the only person he asked that question or, or if my words were the ones that helped him make up his mind not to take his life, but it was not until I read one of his last articles for his church newsletter that I realized what he was struggling with.

These were the words that he wrote (I had printed the words on a sheet of paper I had folded up and put in my pocket. I pulled the paper out at this point as if it had been a personal letter Karl had written me):

"Someone once observed that when Jesus hung on the cross, all he had left was his trust. Talk about rain! Jesus was stripped of all his clothing of all his friends, all his wealth, all his dignity, all his strength. All he had left while hanging there was his trust. And amazingly, it was that trust, and that trust alone that saw him through his death and eventual resurrection.

When the sun is shining in our lives, we begin to form the impression that somehow it has been our wisdom, our work, our wealth, our strength that has kept that sun shining and the rain from falling on our heads.

We think that somehow, WE'VE brought under OUR control God's blessings toward us. We assume that we are self-made people.

But the truth remains that it could start raining - and raining hard - at a moment's notice, and there is precious little we can do about it except to get wet.

For we are never self-made people.

We are God-made people.

And if anyone is to get the credit, it is to be Him.

We are, after all, always vulnerable to the enemies which surround us whether we admit it to ourselves or not.

So what is there to do when it does start raining?

One option of course is to curse it - to engage in debate and speculation as to whose fault it is and what went wrong. I guess it's OK for those who seem to get comfort from such endeavors, but it really gets one nowhere.

To me, the other option makes more sense - to accept the rain. And then to learn through it (at last) that the only thing that we really have in our world to get us through... the only thing that we can rely upon... the only thing that works... the only thing that no amount of rain can ever take away.

It's our trust in God.

And sometimes we simply fail to realize that until we are forced to face the rain without it."

This world can be harsh and cruel and unfair.
And no amount of earthly wisdom can stop that from happening.
But what gives us our advantage as Christians is the Wisdom of God that we received by the
power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.