

Of Wisdom, Madness, and Folly
Ecclesiastes 1:16-18, 2:12-17
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Read Ecclesiastes 1:16-18, 2:12-17 (*after Psalms & Proverbs, before Isaiah & Jeremiah*)
“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Introduction: The Know-It-All

A.J. Jacobs is an author who takes on different projects (you could call them stunts) that are extremely difficult in order to reflect on them, learn about himself and the human condition, and write about them. I’ve described his work with his book, *Thanks A Thousand*, where he went and personally thanked a thousand people who were part of producing his morning cup of coffee. Another book is called *The Year of Living Biblically*, where he wrote down every command and prohibition in the Bible and attempted to live it out for a year. For *The Know-It-All*, a book he wrote in 2004, he set out to read all 32 volumes of the Encyclopedia Britannica. The tongue-in-cheek subtitle to the book is “One Man’s Humble Quest to Become the Smartest Person in the World.” When he told his aunt Marti that he was trying to become the smartest man in the world, she replied, “And how are you defining intelligence? Just the amount of information you have?” “Yup.” “Well, that’s not very intelligent.” “Well, I haven’t gotten to the letter I in my reading yet.” When he told his high school English teacher about it, he replied, “this is a ridiculous project. A complete waste of your time... you’re actually dumber now. You’re taking an original, pure mind, which is a crystal reflection of the soul, and you’re making it dirty and crusty, so you won’t be able to see anything. You’re cluttering your mind... You’re probably retaining a huge amount of superficial knowledge, and since we live in a superficial culture, you will impress people with your facts. But what about wisdom?” “I’m not up to the W’s yet,” was his cheap, fallback answer.

In the course of the year, he joined Mensa, the group for brilliant people, interviewed Alex Trebek, and went on the game show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, in between devoting every spare second to reading through the encyclopedias, even with the impending birth of his first son. And at the end of it all he felt very accomplished, but he concluded that, “I’m worried that I’m not intelligent enough to process all my data into some coherent conclusion or worldview... I know firsthand the oceanic volume of information in the world. I know that I know very little of that ocean.”¹

Let’s turn to our Scripture text now, to a man who could actually claim to be the smartest person in the world. A man whose IQ must be off the charts. He would be able to dominate *Jeopardy*, and stun the Mensa crowd, the PhDs, and the Einstein’s of any age. Plato, Aristotle, Socrates – morons in comparison. And yet, for all his knowledge, he is unsure whether his wisdom and learning would be the key to unlock the meaning in life that he hoped it would be.

Last week’s sermon text told us that Solomon’s plan in writing Ecclesiastes was to explore all the different areas of life to see which ones bring meaning and satisfaction. In today’s text, the area of focus and reflection is human wisdom and learning. That’s certainly an area of life where people

¹ A.J. Jacobs, *The Know-It-All: One Man’s Humble Quest to Become the Smartest Person in the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), pp. 19, 95-96, 369.

find great reward and often find their identity. We've all been around the "know-it-all," the person who reminds you how many degrees they have, how they explain everything to you, starting with, "Well actually, blah blah blah." I remember a guy in college who told a group of us that, "I have a fair amount of knowledge in every subject known to mankind." Except maybe humility.

As we move into our text today, the first thing that Solomon realizes is that

I. Knowledge Brings Sorrow (1:16-18)

¹⁶I 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." ¹⁷And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind.

¹⁸For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.

Verse 16 is Solomon's internal dialogue recognizing that he has been blessed with great wisdom and knowledge. He doesn't credit God for giving it to him, but we read from 1 Kings chapter 3 last week that God had offered to give him whatever we wanted near the beginning of his kingly reign. Solomon asked for an understanding mind, for wisdom, which God granted, saying, "*Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you*" (1 Kings 3:12b). Basically, "I'm making you the smartest person ever, Solomon." The writer of Kings then gives a story demonstrating Solomon's wisdom: two women, prostitutes, lived in the same house and both had baby sons roughly the same age. One of them accidentally rolled over her baby while they were sleeping and crushed him to death. But she acted quickly when she woke up and switched her dead baby with the other woman's living baby. When the other mother woke up, so realized what had happened because she recognized that this dead baby was not hers. So they went to Solomon to decide their case. How did the King rule before DNA tests were available? He ordered a sword to cut the living baby in half to give half to each woman (which was a test). When the real mother begged him not to and was willing to have the boy given to the other woman, Solomon had found the true mother and returned the baby to her. The final verse in 1 Kings 3 (v. 28) says, "*And all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice.*"

But Solomon here says that, like so many other things in life, acquiring much wisdom is a striving after wind. Why? Because "*he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.*" Bad timing with this being back-to-school month for the kids, right? "Hey kids, be diligent in school, learn all you can to become the smartest and brightest. But the Bible says it's somewhat pointless, and it's just going to make you angry and sad." Score another one for the depressing realism of Ecclesiastes! Is there truth here, though? Can we get a handle on what Solomon is saying? How about the well-known phrase, "The more you know, the more you know you don't know." I think that's getting at the idea here: as you grow in your understanding of the world, your horizons get expanded to realize how many things there are out there to learn. For example, if you become fluent in a language, let's say, Spanish, that's something to be proud of. Not every American learns a second language, right? But the World Atlas website says that there are 7,099 languages spoken in the world today.² You could dedicate your life to being a linguist and learn as many languages as you could, and you would only be able to learn a small fraction of the ones that exist! As we learn more, we realize how limited we are. Any area of life that you investigate will show you the massive amount that you don't know and never will! Not to mention that we learn about some really disturbing things, right? Wisdom and knowledge don't necessarily make things brighter and happier; they bring a certain amount of baggage with them that makes Solomon discount them in his search for meaning in life.

² <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-languages-are-there-in-the-world.html>

Having said all of that, however, wisdom is not a bad thing. We certainly have to agree that

II. Wisdom Is Greater Than Folly (2:12-14a)

¹² So I turned to consider wisdom and madness and folly. For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done. ¹³ Then I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, as there is more gain in light than in darkness. ¹⁴ The wise person has his eyes in his head, but the fool walks in darkness.

Now, it would be easy to look at the earlier verses from chapter one and perhaps think that we need a child-like faith that doesn't ask many questions. That the less we learn and think, the less we'll be disenchanted with life. And in churches, in Christianity, sometimes there's the suspicion that the more you study, the less likely you are to hold onto your faith. I remember sitting around with a group of youth pastors in my mid- to late-20s, and the subject of going to seminary came up. And the guys started calling it cemetery and really bashing the idea of a young man going to seminary to improve his ministry. The consensus seemed to be that studying theology formally had the potential to kill your faith and that you would be a better pastor by not going to seminary, just read your Bible, pray a lot, and you should be good to go. I challenged that line of thinking, and I challenge it in any Christian who thinks that reading more and learning more will destroy your faith. The word "theology" means "study of God," why would I not want to study more? Now, I realize that there are a lot of scholarly works that attempt to undermine faith and tear down the Bible, so if you're going to read those, please be grounded in your understanding of the Scripture and in books from authors who believe in God and the authority of the Bible. I know that studying theological writings from godly men has immensely strengthened my faith and my ministry.

Solomon seems to be saying that anyone else who studies and thinks about the things that he's thinking about will come to same conclusions that he has. And clearly, pursuing wisdom is greater than staying ignorant. Wisdom and education help a person see correctly, it helps them walk in the light. The fool walks in darkness. If you have the choice between walking through a dark house or a dark forest with a light or in total darkness, you'd be crazy not to use the light, right? In the same way, if you have the opportunity to gain wisdom and use it to your advantage in life – so that you get a better job, know how to get a mortgage, learn how to start a business, drive a car, whatever – get to it! That's always going to make your life better and easier than stumbling along refusing to learn new things. But wisdom doesn't solve everything. Our last few verses remind us that

III. The Wise Die Just Like Fools (2:14b-17)

And yet I perceived that the same event happens to all of them. ¹⁵ Then I said in my heart, "What happens to the fool will happen to me also. Why then have I been so very wise?" And I said in my heart that this also is vanity. ¹⁶ For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! ¹⁷ So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

It seems very early in the book for Solomon to say, "*I hated life,*" doesn't it? But there it is in verse 17, and it sounds as though the logic is something like this: I hate the fact that death is unfair, so I hate life. Why is death unfair? Because, while there is more gain in wisdom than in folly, both the wise man and the fool will end up in a box in the ground! Neither one of them is immortal nor will they be remembered after their death for very long. For all of its benefits, wisdom cannot ultimately keep us from death. Steve Davis reminded me of Shakespeare's Macbeth soliloquy that captures the spirit of Ecclesiastes: "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." In other words, we're like actors on a stage for a short time; we live our lives, we play our parts, but as soon as we're off the stage (we die), we are soon forgotten and it will

amount to nothing. Death will be coming up over and over in Ecclesiastes, so we're not going to dwell on it very long right now. But Solomon mentions death in connection with almost every area of life that he's going to look at – wisdom, pleasure, work, possessions, all those things. It's because we use all of those things to insulate us from pain and reality, and keep us happy and fulfilled. But then death is brought in as the needle that bursts our balloons.³ Death is the great reality that you cannot avoid, and whatever subject you're talking about needs to be discussed in connection with how death will impact it. And since the wise dies just like the fool, and wisdom counts for nothing in the grave, wisdom cannot be the ultimate source of satisfaction and meaning, can it?

Conclusion:

There are a lot of brilliant atheists and agnostics out there: Stephen Hawking, the physicist and cosmologist; Noam Chomsky, the father of modern linguistics, Warren Buffett, the "Oracle of Omaha," one of the greatest investment gurus ever, Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist, not to mention probably many of the PhDs and professors all over American universities. If the Bible taught that the more you learned things and the smarter you became, the more likely you were to figure out there's a God, then we've got a real problem. If God blessed every person who reached a certain intellectual plane with knowledge of His ways, then what do we do with these brilliant people who deny that there is even a God at all, much less that He is Yahweh God of the Old & New Testaments? We can recite Psalm 14:1, "*the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'*" and Proverbs 1:7 – "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction,*" but these people are not fools, they're some of the smartest people in the modern world. How do we reconcile this?

Paul gives us some solid ground to stand on in 1 Corinthians 1:22-25: "*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.***" Then chapter 2:6-7, 13 – "*Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart **a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory... (verse 13) And we impart this in words **not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.*****" As brilliant as those atheists are, and I wouldn't last one minute in a debate with them, they will never have access to the foolish wisdom that every Christian in every age has been given. When Paul says it is a secret, hidden wisdom that is not of this age, I think he means it's not of any age. God revealing Himself in the person of Jesus Christ to be crucified on our behalf is so crazy that no culture, no era in human history in any part of the world would come up with that. It has to be revealed to you by the Holy Spirit. It is the deep spiritual truth that you must have a spiritually regenerated heart to receive.

You either build your whole system of truth with the starting proposition that there is a God who created everything ("*In the beginning God*") and then you build from there, or you start with the proposition that we can only determine truth from what we can see and experience, what we can test and verify. You either build on a foundation of belief or unbelief. And since God is unknowable unless He chooses to reveal Himself, those who must prove everything will never stumble upon Him, will never design an experiment to prove or disprove Him. You need faith, but faith grounded in reason and revealed truth.

³ David Gibson, *Living Life Backward* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), p. 37.

The next time someone tells you that they believe in science and human reason, and that your faith is just a crutch that holds you back, I want you to remember the end of the book of Job (*turn to Job 38*). At the end of all of Job's conversations with his friends, with all their wrestling over why God allows and causes things to happen, and Job has asked God for an answer for why he has gone through all of his suffering, God answer him in a series of rhetorical questions: (38:4-8) "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements – surely you know! Or who stretch the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy? Or who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb.*" (38:12) "*Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place, that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth, and the wicked be shaken out of it?*" (38:17-18) "*Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this.*" Basically, four chapters of unrelenting reminders that there is a whole bunch of things that only God knows, that human beings were not around for in creation and will never be able to see or understand. God does not owe us answers about anything, and it's rather arrogant and rebellious to demand them of Him, or to assume that our wisdom will catch us up to His.

Our new song this morning said, "Your grace that I cannot explain, not by my earthly wisdom." Earthly wisdom is a wonderful thing to desire and obtain, but ultimately it cannot solve everything. While wisdom has its place in our lives, it has a limited value and we often oversell it, particularly when it's not accompanied by fear of, and belief in, the Lord. Proverbs 2:6 – "*For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding.*" The most brilliant person in the world would never figure out God and His ways if God did not reveal Himself. And in Solomon, we have the most brilliant person who ever lived, and thankfully, he acknowledged the limitations of his wisdom.

Paul tells us where we find true wisdom: Colossians 2:3 – "*Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*" You see, our ultimate problem as human beings is not a lack of knowledge. We don't have an intellectual problem, we have a moral problem. We are sinners in need of a Savior, not uneducated simpletons in need of a Master Professor. God did not give us a huge pile of knowledge to master and learn and memorize; He gave us His Son's body hanging on a wooden cross to atone for our sins. The simplest child and the most brilliant PhD scientist get to heaven the same way: by humbling themselves, recognizing that their sin has separated them from a holy God, and that the only way for them to be reconciled to God is to have someone else die in their place. And Jesus, the wisdom of God incarnate, died to pay the penalty for our sin.

Once you have been made right with God, then God will show you how to use wisdom well. Let's close by reading James 3:13-15, 17 – "*Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic... But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.*" That is the wisdom that we need, Amen.

Benediction: 2 Corinthians 4:5-6 – "*For what we proclaim is not ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*"