

I Intro. (Aug. 12, 2007)

One would not likely have concluded what Solomon concluded here, and that is that wisdom in and of itself brings no satisfaction, no real meaning to our lives. Many would militate against that idea vociferously, especially “successful” unbelievers, who have made fortunes and guided their children to similar destinies by the use of shrewd (Lk. 16:8) thinking and good decision making over the long haul. “What more can one expect from this life?” they might be thinking. Ironically perhaps most believers would agree. Solomon would not.

Solomon sets forth his case regarding this matter (1:12-14). He reveals the obvious limits on wisdom (1:15-17). His discouraging conclusion is stated in 1:18.

II Wisdom Itself Fails to Fulfill (1:12-18).

A. Solomon sets forth his case regarding this matter (1:12-14).

1. (vs. 12) We have already seen that the author, “the Preacher,” has “been king over Israel in Jerusalem,” not at all excluding the possibility that he *was* king at the time of this writing. The fact that he was king put him in a position of possessing “unique resources for investigating life.”¹ After all, he was God’s anointed as king over God’s chosen people, Israel, in that unique set-apart city of Jerusalem, the “holy city” (Neh. 11:1). Obviously such a king should have wisdom as he endeavors to lead God’s chosen people. Solomon had it, and it came to him directly from God (1Kg. 4:29-34). This of course was all because when God told Solomon, “Ask what *you wish* me to give you” (3:5b), he said, “give Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people to discern between good and evil”² (3:9a). He got a “wise and discerning heart” (vs. 12) because he did not ask for a “long life,” or “riches,” or “the life of” his “enemies” (cf. vs. 11), things people might typically have requested.

2. (vs. 13) Consistent with his position and his divine endowments, Solomon “set” his “mind,” literally, “heart” (s.v. 17), meaning his, “inner man,”³ “to seek and explore,”

that is, to make “a thorough...and comprehensive investigation”⁴ “by” (cf. Septuagint - “ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ”) means of his divine gift of “wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven,” that is, “of all kinds of human activities.”⁵ Perhaps Solomon’s perspective is made up primarily of his own experiences, but he has a view to the activities of others as well. His conclusion is that, “*It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with,*” not just Solomon. Some think, but not all (cf. notes on vs. 14), the reference in the expression “grievous task” is to the whole process of learning, while using the wisdom that one has to seek out the truth of accurate knowledge: “In fact, he says that it is an unhappy business with which God allows men to occupy themselves—this deep inner drive to find out the meaning of life.”⁶ That is in the context (vv. 17-18) and is likely a subpoint of his comprehensive statement “concerning **all** that has been done under heaven” (bold added). As Malcolm Muggeridge said, “Education, the great mumbo-jumbo and fraud of the ages, purports to equip us to live, and is prescribed as a universal remedy for everything from juvenile delinquency to premature senility. For the most part, it only serves to enlarge stupidity, inflate conceit, enhance credulity and put those subjected to it at the mercy of brainwashers with printing presses, radio and television at their disposal.”⁷

The expression, “a grievous task” means, “a bad or unpleasant task”⁸ and is translated in the NIV “‘a miserable business’ in 4:8 and ‘some misfortune’ in 5:14,”⁹ translated “a bad investment” there in the NASB. The Hebrew expression, יָנְיָן [‘inyan /in-yawn/] appears eight times in Ecc. (1:13, 2:23, 26; 3:10; 4:8; 5:2, 13; 8:16). Normally it means “task” and then “in weakened sense, *a bad business, bad affair,*”¹⁰ as is the case here.

4Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

5Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

6MacDonald, William and Arthur Farstad. *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*. electronic ed. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997. c1995. Ec 1:13.

7William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file]*, electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

8Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

9Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

10Richard Whitaker, Francis Brown, S.R. (Samuel Rolles) Driver and Charles A. (Charles Augustus) Briggs, *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament : From A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament by Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles Briggs, Based on the Lexicon of Wilhelm Gesenius (Oak Harbor WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, c1906). 775-2-6.1.*

1Tom Constable. *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible*. Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003. Ec 1:12.
2New American Standard Bible : 1995 Update. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995. 1 Ki 3:9.
3Richard Whitaker, Editor, *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.) 1997.

There is also some debate as to whether God means *God* here in the normal sense. “The reference to **God** in this verse must not be equated with deep personal faith. The name of *God* is what W. J. Erdman calls His natural name—*Elohim*. As mentioned in the introduction, this name presents Him as the Almighty One who created the universe. But nowhere in this book does Solomon acknowledge Him as the covenant-keeping Jehovah who shows redeeming grace to those who put their trust in Him”¹¹ (bold original). It seems better however to understand the reference indeed to be to God in the normal sense, as certainly must be the case in Ecc. 12:13, not that this necessarily extends to the knowledge of “redeeming grace to those who put their trust in Him.”¹²

3. (vs. 14) Solomon added, “I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind.” As is further evidenced here Solomon was probably not limiting himself to the frustrations of learning, etc., in vs. 13. So certain writers naturally say that the reference is broader than that, extending to the fact that “all kinds of human activities...are...futile or **meaningless**. In fact they are as useless as **chasing after the wind**, a graphic picture of effort expended with no results gained since no one can catch the wind by running after it. Solomon used this phrase nine times, all in the first half of the book (1:14, 17; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 6, 16; 6:9)”¹³ (bold original).

Remember the Purpose of Ecclesiastes: To show that life viewed merely and only from earth’s perspective is utterly devoid of any meaning whatsoever. So Glenn says that Solomon “intended to demonstrate empirically to people the insecurity of all human effort to provide any real meaning, value, or significance to their lives ‘under the sun’ and to drive them to trust in God alone.”¹⁴

B. Solomon reveals the obvious limits on wisdom (1:15-17).

1. (vs. 15) He noted that, “What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted.” “Human effort and action cannot remedy all the irregularities or counteract all the deficiencies observable in the nature of **things**”¹⁵ (bold original). Solomon will say in 7:13, “Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent?” Partly because of sin and subsequently, the curse (cf. Rm. 8:18-25), life is full of enigmas, forces, and conundrums about which man has no clue. Notwithstanding certain profound areas of progress in technology and health, He certainly fails to grasp the dynamics of aging and dying, and most certainly is utterly powerless to prevent them. As man has been appointed to die (Hb. 9:27), so he will. This is part of the reason for the seeming absurdity, vanity, and meaninglessness of everything.

2. (vs. 16) It certainly was not that Solomon did not try to understand everything. He did the best that he could with his gifts from God, but there were still limitations. Yet his wisdom was unprecedented as he had “magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before” him. Indeed he had observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.” So he had both the facts and knew how to properly use them. This was all in accordance with the promise of God to him (1 Kin. 3:12; 4:30; 10:23). He said in Ecc. 2:9, “Then I became great and increased more than all who preceded me in Jerusalem. My wisdom also stood by me.” As it says in 1Kg. 4:29-34, “Now God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like the sand that is on the seashore. And Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all men, than Ethan the Ezrahite, Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol; and his fame was *known* in all the surrounding nations. He also spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs were 1,005. And he spoke of trees, from the cedar that is in Lebanon even to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish. And men came from all peoples to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all

11William MacDonald, edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

12William MacDonald, edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments* [computer file], electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

13Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

14Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

15Walvoord, John F., and Zuck, Roy B., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Scripture Press Publications, Inc.) 1983, 1985.

the kings of the earth who had heard of his wisdom.” However, there were still many things that were beyond him (Ecc. 4:15). He was not omniscient.

3. (vs. 17) Finally Solomon decided to “set” his “mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly,” apparently as an end in themselves, finding in the end “that this also is striving after wind.” He attempted “both extremes of human behavior, just in case the true meaning of life was found in either or in both. He ran the gamut of life’s experiences, but his disconsolate conclusion was that it was all a **grasping for the wind**”¹⁶ (bold original). Wisdom here is to be understood in the sense of “using human intelligence as an instrument to ferret out truth and significance.”¹⁷ This also failed “to turn up any meaningful activity. Consequently wisdom was in this respect no better than “madness and folly” (v. 17; i.e., foolish ideas and pleasures).”¹⁸ “Madness” refers to that which is not sane or of sound mind. Folly refers to that which lacks “good sense, understanding, or foresight.”¹⁹ Both “imply moral perversity rather than mental oddity”²⁰ as such. The world is full of people who believe that meaning can be found in acting like a nut and casting caution to the wind. They could not be more wrong. They are deluded.

Again the word “mind” translates “heart,” which “points to the combined use of mind and will in the quest for knowledge. Biblical Hebrew has no specific words for mind or brain. Thinking and understanding and deciding are all done by the ‘heart’”²¹ (italics original). Very often the word “heart” in the NT is used in exactly the same way.

C. Solomon’s discouraging conclusion is stated in 1:18.

1. (vs. 18) Solomon explained his conclusion of vs. 17 by saying that “in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge *results in* increasing pain.”²² “As a man learns disturbing facts about himself, he

becomes more aware of his own ignorance and less satisfied with his own heart. As he attains greater insight into what is wrong in the world, he is less willing to trust his fellowman. In other words, the pain and heartache resulting from ‘wisdom’ and ‘knowledge’ come as the futility of earthly possessions is realized. Wisdom and knowledge in themselves, though good, are comfortless.”²³

A professor of mine once said that the life of the “teacher or preacher is one of great frustration and difficulty” because the nature of the work is trying to accurately understand concepts and ideas and while maintaining truth in integrity, putting these things together in a meaningful way in the real world dealing with real human beings, each of whom comes with this own array of contrary concepts and ideas that need to be corrected. I now know what he was talking about.

III Conc.

There is no escaping the fact that Solomon is once again correct in his analysis that nothing that is ultimately confined to this world only has any meaning whatsoever, no, not even wisdom.

¹⁶William MacDonald; edited with introductions by Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible commentary: Old and New Testaments [computer file]*, electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1995 by William MacDonald.

¹⁷Tom Constable, Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003).

¹⁸Tom Constable, Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Ec 1:16.

¹⁹*The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition* copyright ©

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²⁰Tom Constable, Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Ec 1:16.

²¹Tom Constable, Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003; 2003). Ec 1:16.

²²New American Standard Bible . electronic edition. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1986;

Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. Ec 1:18.

23W.A. Criswell, *Believer’s study Bible [computer file]*, electronic ed., Logos Library System, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson) 1997, c1991 by the Criswell Center for Biblical Studies.