



The following is the summary of the Sunday sermon that is sent to the body at Steadfast in an email called "The Weekly"

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

The Futility of Human Wisdom

Last week Solomon contrasted the uniformity and permanence of the natural world with the transitory and impermanence of the human condition. It was puzzling and it caused him to reach the conclusion of "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Life makes no sense; it seems futile and empty. Using his greatest gift, his wisdom, he launched a thorough investigation of life "under the sun." Using his wisdom, could he find the solution to his dilemma? Would his brilliance solve the problem?

A few stylistic observations about this unit.

- Note that in v. 13 and v. 17 we see the phrase "I applied my heart." This is called an inclusio, the bracketing of a unit of thought with the same phrase.
- Note also in v. 13 the phrase "to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven"; in v. 14 that he states "I have seen everything"; and in v. 16 "I have acquired great wisdom." These phrases reflect an intense, deliberate study using data, information, experimentation and diligent contemplation.
- Note his qualifications:
 - He had been ruling as king over Jerusalem, v.12
 - He had diligently applied himself to this question. V. 13
 - He had carefully observed all that pertained to the question, v. 14
 - He had acquired more wisdom and knowledge than most other people, v. 16
 - He found much grief and sorrow in things as they were, v. 17.
 - Note also that Solomon switches from using the third person in 1:1-2 to the first person in 1:12. If anyone could unlock the mysteries of life, it was he, the king of Jerusalem, the wisest man who had ever lived!

The Futility of Human Wisdom 1:12-18

vv. 12-13—Solomon used his extraordinary gifts of wisdom and discernment to "seek" and "search out," "all that is done under heaven." These words suggest a thorough and comprehensive examination of all human activity. It must have involved an exhaustive study

of all dimensions of human achievement—science, architecture, history, literature, etc. He explored and investigated all subjects and all aspects of human knowledge and achievement. He found this task to be an “unhappy business” (a “heavy burden”) that God has laid on the “children of man,” the human race. What does that mean? “Heavy burden” in Hebrew means a bad or unpleasant task, a miserable business. Solomon is clearly alluding to the effects of Adam’s fall on the entire human race. He labored intensely but found no satisfactory answers or conclusions. God plants in the human mind and heart a desire to know things, to master things, to reach substantive conclusions. But, because of the human condition, trapped in sin and dysfunction, finding the truth and attaining satisfaction seems elusive.

v. 14—explains why: Note the words “everything. . .” and “all . . .”—they are meaningless, are a “striving after wind.” What does that mean? “Striving after wind” is a rather graphic picture of much effort expended with no real results achieved. One can never “catch” the wind. It is futile.

v. 15—Stated as a proverb, this verse shows his main point: All human effort and all human achievement cannot remedy all the irregularities or counteract all the deficiencies in the world. As the Apostle Paul argues in Romans 8:20, all of creation is subjected to “futility.” No investigation is going to make up what is deficient and lacking from anything in this world. So much is lacking that it boggles the mind: All that is crooked, twisted, perverted and turned upside down cannot be set right and put in order. Despite all his brilliance and wisdom, Solomon could not overcome his temporal, finite, sin-cursed nature and mind. Remember that Solomon’s investigation was on the horizontal, temporal, terrestrial plane of things. His box was closed. At this point in his investigation, there was no room for the eternal or infinite.

v. 16—This is a personal reflection on his situation. He knew he was wise—the wisest man who ever lived. He also knew that this wisdom had guided the reflection he describes in the preceding verses. So this personal reality causes him to do some further reflection. He wants to contrast the two dimensions of the human condition—the wise vs. the fool.

v. 17—That further reflection is to consider the difference between wisdom and “madness and folly.” He compares and contrasts these two states and reaches a staggering conclusion—it too is striving after wind. [You never “catch” the wind!] It is frustrating, not satisfying; it is even depressing, leading to despair.

v. 18—In fact, the pursuit of wisdom actually produced the opposite of what he had hoped for: Instead of contentment, he found “vexation” and “sorrow.” Why? Solomon concluded that with “much wisdom comes vexation [mental anguish]” and with “much knowledge comes more sorrow [sadness of heart].” But what kind of “wisdom” is this? This is the proud, human wisdom of hubris; it dethrones God and deifies humanity. If the box is closed, humanity will

never find contentment or satisfaction. The desire to know all things, to master everything, will always result in increased grief, anxiety and frustration.

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