



Speaker:  
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## The Limitations of Human Reason

Series: Ecclesiastes · 2 of 2

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Wisdom is a good thing...except when it isn't.

Anyone who knows the Bible is already aware of the value of wisdom. But what type of wisdom is that?

The wisdom which comes from God is without doubt a good thing. We should all want it. Yet the author of Ecclesiastes seems to say it's no good! Either there's something wrong with him or he's speaking about one particular *type* of wisdom.

This book has more than one author, it seems. The bulk of the book was written by a man called Kohelet. This name is almost never kept but is translated as "The Preacher" or "The Teacher" as in v12. In any case, it seems to be another name for Solomon. Also in v12, he even identifies himself as "king over Israel".

Let me say again: **the point of the whole book is to show how ridiculous it is to look for meaning in life—unless you have God.** To combat this, man has invented innumerable ways to fill in time, to try to give life some purpose. Young people who get drawn away from the things of God are always impressed by the huge variety this world has to offer.

Here, Solomon teaches it's all meaningless. And he has the credentials to back it up. If you have a look at 1 Kings 4:29-30, it says:

*And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt.*

So he speaks with authority here. Back in Ecclesiastes, v16 echoes that. And we see in v13 just how much he gave himself to the task. He really did apply himself. Let's listen to what he found.

### 1. Nothing makes much sense

We know Solomon elsewhere taught that heavenly wisdom is not only a blessing but is very useful. He said it was a good thing, something we're to pursue.

And it's a good quest he's on here. As you know, most people in the world don't give any serious thought to the meaning of life. They ignore the biggest and most important questions and fill their lives instead with trivia.

Here, it's as if he's showing us that man's wisdom alone gets you nowhere. If a person, using just their own reason, tries to answer those big questions in life, the preacher here calls it—in v14—"a striving after wind."

Try to picture a man chasing the wind. Here's the wind coming from behind him. It rushes past him. So he starts running. And he gets to a point where he thinks he must have caught up with it. So, fast as lightning, he reaches out and grabs the wind! Then he slowly opens his fingers only to find his hand is completely empty.

That's the picture. A man does his best to find out what life's all about. But no matter how successful he thinks he's been, he's still empty-handed.

In v15, we see a proverb. Have a glance at it again. It uses the idea of, say, a branch of an oak tree which is crooked and bent. You can't straighten it. And if we continue to use the oak tree as our example, we might say it describes here a man trying to count acorns...when he only has one!

Seeing as this section's about trying to answer the big questions in life using the power of your own thought alone, we should understand this proverb primarily in this sense:

- Just when you think you're getting somewhere in your investigation into life, there are twists and turns that you can do nothing about. That's the crookedness.
- And you only have limited information. You don't have enough to come to a right conclusion. That's the lack.

Some ancient philosophers believed a life pursuing wisdom was the highest calling a man could have. What does Solomon say? We find it in the second half of v13:

**It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.**

The Epicureans wouldn't like that!

Now I don't want you to think Solomon despises education, science or even philosophy. But these things can't answer the big questions. People who think about the important stuff want to know why they're here. How they should live. How to come to terms with how brief life is:

**Psalm 39:5—Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing before you. Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!**

My generation will soon be gone. And God would have us pass the baton to the next generation. He's put believing children in the churches because soon it'll be their turn to

carry on the work. And I pray they'll be more studious, and zealous, and prayerful than we've been!

And carnal wisdom won't help them. Remember, too: even if the wisdom they acquire is more of a heavenly type, they still won't be as intelligent as God! Heavenly wisdom won't make them all-knowing. Life will still be full of difficult questions that can't be answered.

## 2. You can't do much about it

There's the thing, isn't it? How much can we really change things?

The world is broken. It's messed up. And I'm afraid we can't fix it! People get involved in various movements for change but are often frustrated at how little difference they make.

I devoted a huge chunk of my life to a few causes which were important to me. And when I think of all the time and money expended; when I think of all that activity and all those debates, the truth is very little has changed. Even worse, the tiny difference I did make could be undone in a day. All it takes is a change in government or a change in society's views, and everything I worked for will be gone.

If you've ever watched the goings-on in the United States during an election, you'll know the whole thing is shallow. People can lose the presidency because their tie wasn't on straight or they made a silly comment one day. And their campaigns are made of the froth of marketing. They spend millions of dollars on psychological techniques to manipulate the people into voting for them.

When President Obama was running his presidential campaign, his people saturated their communications with this slogan: *Change you can believe in.*

And millions of Americans, who believed this man was going to create a new world for them, voted him in. And like every president before him, he proceeded to go back on the things he'd promised. Soon, the hysteria died down, as people realised nothing really was going to change. For all the razzmatazz and slick speeches, their lives were pretty much the same.

As for the alterations which *are* made by our leaders, what do they really change?

- Have they stopped slavery, for example? No. Slavery's still a global business.
- Have they, perhaps, ended the killing of children in their mother's wombs? No. There are more killings of this type today than there's ever been.
- Have the changes in our modern world prevented war? No. There's still not been a single 24-hour period where there has been peace on Earth. Leaders still send off their young men to die, and the young men—perhaps thinking this gives them a purpose in life—readily sign up.

Change we can believe in?

This proverb in v15. I said it was about the obstacles man comes up against when he tries to figure out what life's all about.

But it could also be broadened out. We could think of this proverb in a *moral* sense. What do I mean exactly?

This world is morally crooked. It's **sinful**. People live their lives pursuing pleasure. As I said earlier, this world has created a multitude of attractions for sinful men and women to pursue. There are so many distractions, and they're so brightly coloured, *many* people run towards them. By their own blind wisdom, they consider the activities of the local church as extremely dull in comparison.

So the world is crooked. And the proverb leads us to understand it can't be fixed. Man cannot put an end to sin. Never mind making a society sinless; a man cannot even make HIMSELF sinless! He or she is addicted to sin, and no amount of willpower, or self-belief, or positive thinking can break that addiction, that rebellion against God.

The world is twisted. But the proverb reminds us it's also lacking. When I read this, I was reminded of that verse in Romans 3. It's the one we have on one of our new gospel signs. It says all people have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

If the glory of God was to be found on the top of a mountain, we'd never be able to climb to the top. Or if the glory of God was to be found at the end of a race, we'd never reach the finishing line.

We lack what is needed to reach the perfect standards of God:

- We're lacking in holiness
- We're lacking in true wisdom
- We're lacking in every way that matters.

And the proverb would indicate we have such a lack of anything good in ourselves that it's not even worth trying to count our good points.

We might have *some* good points. God, in his mercy, furnishes men with the ability to do *some* good in this world. This is the only way mankind can function in societies. If God left us alone, everything would go to pieces very quickly.

**BUT EVEN THOSE GLIMMERS OF GOODNESS WE SEE IN THE WORLD AROUND US ARE A MILLION MILES SHORT OF THAT STANDARD WHICH IS GOD'S GLORY.** And unless a man reaches that impossible standard, he'll be eternally lost, doomed to live in a damp, dark dungeon for ever.

This is the whole reason the gospel exists. The gospel is a solution to a problem. The problem is our sin. It offends God. Sin is so contrary to the being of God that every time we sin, no matter how trivial we consider it, we can think of it jarring God to the core.

And this is why the son of God came. This is why Jesus of Nazareth was destined to grow up into a young man and make his way to Jerusalem. He had an appointment with death.

Can it be true? Did he leave heaven's glory to come down here and hand himself over to be savagely killed? Was he really murdered by members of a race of creatures whose saviour he was?

It's all true. **He volunteered to be beaten to death in his soul by an angry father — a father he'd done nothing against.** But in the mystery of the atonement, a trinitarian God agreed to this dreadful but glorious solution.

THE SON HUNG ON A CROSS, READY TO TAKE THE PUNISHMENT FOR SINNERS. THE STRENGTHENING AND COMFORTING HOLY SPIRIT TURNED HIS BACK ON HIM. AND THE FATHER, FURIOUS WITH YOU AND FURIOUS WITH ME TOOK IT ALL OUT ON HIS OWN SON.

If Jesus died for a man or a woman, their crooked ways **will** be straightened. If the son paid the price for you, you'll no longer lack. The Lord will **straighten** you out and SORT you out! All who Christ died for will be given faith in Christ, and all who *have* faith in Christ will find eternal forgiveness.

Friends, I said to you the business of finding the meaning of life was a miserable, thankless and inconclusive task. That's just the way God arranged it. **He wants you and I to see without Christ there is nothing but smoke and mirrors and a pointless search for the truth.**

I said we can't change things. But here's change we really *can* believe in. Because the glorious truth about my new job as ambassador for Jesus Christ is that I'm involved in change which will last for ever!

And it's the same for you! If you belong to God, take heart that your efforts in the service of God are truly important. More than that: they're the **ONLY** things which are important.

### 3. Don't dwell on it

What is Solomon's advice to those who think that through the science and philosophy of men we can find satisfaction? V18 gives us his conclusion. **They'll find frustration. They'll find sorrow.**

But there's another angle to this. If we again think about the whole *world* being broken, I said to you it can't be fixed.

But it's not just that. It's not only we experience frustration and sorrow in trying to find truth. We experience frustration and sorrow by *being aware* of just how broken the world is.

Going back to my involvement in various causes in life before I encountered the risen Jesus, I most certainly understand what Solomon meant here. Maybe I can give you an example.

Karen and I spent a number of years campaigning for animal welfare issues:

- We went on marches
- We handed out leaflets
- We wrote letters to MPs
- We had letters printed in newspapers
- We set up stalls in public places, showing videos of animals in need of our help
- And for a few years, we even stopped *eating* animals!

I've already made the point that such massive commitment to a cause changes very little. And if there are any slightly positive changes, when viewed from an eternal perspective they're not that important anyway.

But here's the thing. We had to go through all this frustration and sorrow along the way. There was frustration that we were achieving far too little and it was taking far too long.

But we also had to experience real sorrow as well. Because in all our investigation of every type of animal cruelty which existed in this world, we were upset. We were upset a lot of the time. So there was frustration *and* sorrow as we tried to straighten things which, as it turns out, couldn't be straightened.

It was after all this I truly learned the meaning of the saying, "Ignorance is bliss." It might sound selfish, but if you don't immerse yourself daily in the troubles of this world, you'll have a less sorrowful life.

Whatever good cause a person chooses to get involved in, they'll have to face sorrow as well as frustration. The more they look into what's wrong, the more suffering they'll be aware of, on a scale far greater than the average person.

The big question a person like this has to face is whether it's all worth it. And if not for me to say whether it is or it isn't. But I can caution them to expect little to no change, even though they spend their whole life dedicated to their cause.

However, whether a person chooses to spend their life in deep thinking or in social action, **what I'd impress on them above all is the need to find God.** To understand the world will continue to be a cruel mess until God finally puts an end to it all. **To understand they can only discover real truth and achieve meaningful change when they are servants of the most high.**

This is what I'm urging on you today, whether you're in this room or you're listening on the Internet. Enter God's service. Join the *gospel* cause!

You'll recall I said the name of this man translated in v12 as "Preacher" was Kohelet. And although it's usually translated as "preacher", it literally refers to someone who gathers a group of people together for the purpose of teaching. That being so, listen to what it says here in Luke 13:34

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Here, we find Jesus uttering a condemnation against religious Jerusalem. He cries out that he'd come to gather her children under his wings like a hen, but they resisted him.

So we see here an example of Jesus as **one who gathers in**:

- He gathers in his elect people, all those he died for.
- He gathers them in through his inspired word, the Bible.
- And he gathers them in through the work of the Holy Spirit, revealing himself to them as their saviour and forever securing them as members of that throng which will live with him in eternity.

If Solomon was the wise one who, through his teachings, gathers people together to learn, so much more was Jesus the one who effectually calls people to him. It's for this reason Solomon could be thought of as one who foreshadowed the coming Messiah—in other words, a "type" of Christ.

In another of Jesus's condemnations of sinful people, he said this (Matthew 12:42):

The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here.

Someone greater than Solomon is here today, friends. And someone greater than Solomon lives in the hearts of all those who truly belong to God. And that someone is the Holy One, the Root of Jesse, the Angel of the Covenant: **the Lord Jesus Christ**.

When we hear the great alarm noise of heaven which marks the end of this world, may all who hear his word today be found in Christ.

Amen.