

Session 3

March 17, 2019

THE PROBLEM WITH WISDOM

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17; 7:23-29

Knowledge is good, but wisdom is better. Knowledge is what you know; but wisdom is knowing how to *use* what you know. Yet even the most brilliant thinker and discerning sage is still limited in both knowledge and wisdom. In this week's segment, Solomon turns back to his God-given wisdom to see if he can "reason" his way to fulfillment. His conclusion is not surprising.

The great advantage of wisdom (2:12-14). The wise king already explored the avenue of pleasure, only to find that pleasure by itself left him empty. Perhaps, like is taught in some of the Eastern religions, the physical should be shunned in favor of the mental. Could it be that satisfaction is found through introspection? Is it possible that being wise is its own reward? As the wisest man who ever lived, Solomon was in the unique position to consider his own personal wisdom as the source of his own personal satisfaction. His remark that those who come after him will only find out what he already knew (verse 12), indicates the confidence he had in this new avenue to finding meaning in life. But his conclusion didn't require wisdom at all! Just some common sense: being wise is far better than being foolish! The wise can see, and think, and act accordingly. But the fool stumbles about in a fog of darkness.

The sad truth about wisdom (2:14-17). I have always said that death is the great equalizer. I have sat at the deathbed of the poor as well as the rich; and of the foolish as well as the wise. Regardless of one's station in life, the final station is a cemetery plot! No one is wealthy enough to pay their way around it; no one is wise enough to think their way out of it. That is the sad truth that Solomon ran across so many years ago: "one fate" comes to us all. So, in the grand scheme of things, what is the benefit of being wise? Solomon came to six sobering conclusions: we will all die (v. 14); we will all face our final destiny (v. 15); pursuing wisdom won't matter then, so why bother? (v. 15); no so-called legacy is really, truly remembered (v. 16); it doesn't seem fair when the wise and the foolish share the same dreadful fate (v. 16); and all of this speculation is depressing! (v. 17).

The bitter trap of wisdom (7:23-29). I think all of these verses could be summed up in the old adage, "The more you know, the more you know you don't know!" Now, sometime later in his journey, Solomon looks back and realizes the limitations of human wisdom and logic. The phrase, "it was beyond me" (v. 23) is more a confession than a conclusion, as shown in verse 24. As wise as the king is, he is still quite human. Verse 25 is a bit awkward but indicates that Solomon's search moved him in two directions at the same time. His earnest search for wisdom (to *know*, *explore* and *seek* it) was countered by an increasing awareness of the sinfulness of sin; concluding that "wickedness is stupidity and folly is madness." Verses 26-28 provide an example of sin's consequences, no doubt taken directly from personal experience. Even the wisdom of Solomon couldn't keep him from making poor choices when it came to women! His lament very likely depicts the women of his downfall (see 1 Kings 11:1-8), describing their hearts as *nets* that ensnare lustful men, and their hands as *chains*, enslaving them in their sin. Admittedly, those with a heart for God can (and do) resist such women, while those in the bondage of sin find them irresistible (v. 26). How sad that men who are normally wise become such fools in the arms of these scheming women! His final conclusion? Mankind, who God created in innocence, has devised a multitude of ways to mess things up.