

3

THE PROBLEM WITH WISDOM



When have you seen common sense make more sense than book sense?

QUESTION #1

Wisdom is grounded in trust in God.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

Military conflicts. Civil wars. Corrupt governments. Violence. Drug addiction. The news is constantly reminding us our world is falling apart. But what can we do?

“Education is the answer!” We hear this frequently. If we’ll just educate people, they will learn to overcome their prejudices. Education will correct their thinking and take them beyond their ethnic hatred, violent temperaments, and addictions. Education will enable us to get along with each other—and with ourselves.

If your perspective is that people are basically good, then education may seem to be the logical solution: good people can be taught to choose what is good and right. Unfortunately, that is not the case; it’s certainly not the biblical perspective. The Bible reminds us that our sin and rebellion are at the root of the world’s problems. Education has its benefits to be sure, but it can only do so much. What we need is the wisdom that comes from God.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

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. 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.

No one in the world was wiser than Solomon. So, in his quest to find meaning in life, it's not surprising that Solomon would turn “to consider wisdom and madness and folly.”

Verse 12 is hard to interpret. “For what can the man do who comes after the king? Only what has already been done.” We can understand this verse in two ways.

- ▶ No matter what king came after Solomon, he would have to deal with these same issues.
- ▶ Since Solomon was the wisest person in the world, no other king after him would be able to do any better.

Both interpretations make sense, and the point stands with either one: Whoever came after Solomon would fare no better in trying to explain the world through human wisdom; he would do well to do as Solomon had done.

Why is human wisdom inadequate for life's biggest problems?

QUESTION #2

But wisdom is right thinking that leads to right living. Wisdom and righteous living are wound tightly together. Conversely, folly results in unrighteous living. Solomon turned to investigate the difference between wisdom and folly and he unearthed three realities:

- 1. Even in this life, there is more to gain from wisdom than from folly.** Just as light has advantages over darkness, so also “the wise person has his eyes in his head”; that is, he is able to see, “but the fool walks in darkness.” In a world where wisdom abounds, others benefit from the wise person.
- 2. Whether we live a good life or a wicked life, we all still die and are forgotten.** In the end, Solomon said, it doesn’t matter how we live this life on earth because the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the unrighteous, all share the same fate : death! Wisdom may mean a healthier lifestyle, and we might prolong our lives by several years, but still, in the end, we die.
- 3. Trying to live a righteous life apart from God only leads to frustration and grief.** When you consider the fate of humanity, whether you live a good life or not, what’s the point? The pointlessness and futility of it all can make someone like Solomon hate life. From a purely secular viewpoint, it makes no difference how we live this life if we can’t escape death.

Ecclesiastes 7:23-25

²³ All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. ²⁴ That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? ²⁵ I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness.

Even with all its advantages, human wisdom cannot answer life’s ultimate questions. From a secular point of view—a view of life lived only “under the sun”—human wisdom cannot explain: the intelligent design of the universe, order as opposed to chaos, the complex design of the human body, or concepts such as love or joy.

Since wisdom is beyond us, why do we keep pursuing it?

QUESTION #3

Solomon resolved to test “all this I have tested by wisdom.” In other words, he applied human wisdom to what he saw and experienced all around him. Yet, he had to admit, “It was far from me.” The existence of the world with all its intricacies was “far off, and deep, very deep” when he tried to explain it by mere human wisdom.

Notice the language Solomon used in verse 25: he endeavored to “know and to search out and to seek wisdom.” Solomon took care to try to understand and explain all things by human wisdom. This wasn’t just some casual exercise; he worked at it, but it was beyond him.

It’s not just the good things that the wisdom of this world cannot explain. Human wisdom also has no explanation for “wickedness.” Human wisdom may be sufficient to “know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness,” but it can’t explain why.

Life “under the sun” (2:17) and wisdom apart from God want to assume all people are good, but the environment, lack of education, or absence of first-world perks ruins them. Even highly educated people living in the ideal first-world environment do evil things, and the world is left wondering why.



Ecclesiastes 7:26-29

**²⁶ And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. ²⁷ Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—
²⁸ which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. ²⁹ See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.**

Though Solomon's quest to find meaning by pursuing wisdom proved impossible, his search produced three conclusions:

- 1. Sin affects our relationships.** On the surface, Solomon sounds extremely "anti-woman" in verses 26-28, but from a male perspective, he was addressing the continuing conflict between men and women. Because of sin, the marriage relationship can often be a place of conflict.
- 2. Wisdom is rare in this world.** Solomon confessed that he only found "one man among a thousand" who was wise, and "a woman among all these I have not found." Again, this sounds biased against women, but remember Solomon didn't have the best experience with women. Solomon had disobeyed God's command by marrying hundreds of pagan wives (1 Kings 11:1-6).
- 3. All humanity is sinfully corrupt.** Only when we pursue God will we find the wisdom we need to answer life's questions and to live righteously in this world. Divine wisdom is a gift from God that gives us insight into His character, His will, and His ways. When we embrace His wisdom, it results in righteous living.

This divine wisdom provides the answer to the problem of evil. When God made this good world, Solomon declared, he "made man upright." But instead of living in this upright state and pursuing God, Adam and Eve pursued their own sinful scheme to be like God. And we continue today to foolishly pursue our own schemes.

But that's not the end of the story! God came to earth to bring us back to Himself. The wisdom we need comes from pursuing God through faith in Jesus, and that wisdom leads to righteous living.

What are some ways you have discovered godly wisdom?

QUESTION #4

How can our group help one another gain and maintain godly wisdom?

QUESTION #5

GOD'S SENSE MAKES SENSE

Consider a conversation you might have with a friend who has not trusted in Christ. Choose one of these and write how you would briefly address the topic.

The design of our world

The purpose of humanity

The basis of morality

The universality of sin

The hope of an afterlife

Other

*"No mind, no wisdom—temporary mind,
temporary wisdom—eternal mind, eternal wisdom!"*

—ADONIRAM JUDSON

LIVE IT OUT

When we pursue God, He promises to give us the wisdom we need that leads to righteous living. How will you pursue God this week? Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Consider God's good creation.** On a clear night this week, go outside and look up at the stars. Read Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, and thank God for His wise and creative work.
- ▶ **Memorize Scripture.** Memorize a passage such as Proverbs 3:5-6. This week, think of ways you can pursue God and trust in His wisdom, rather than relying on yourself.
- ▶ **Have a conversation.** Spend time with unbelieving friends, and ask them how they might explain the problems in the world and the nature of sin and evil. As you listen without judging, pray and seek the opportunity to share the gospel and the wisdom of God.

With all the information available to us, it's easy to lean on our own wisdom. Instead, let's pursue God and the wisdom He offers. That's the only wisdom worth possessing.

My thoughts

