

SESSION 3

THE PROBLEM WITH WISDOM

▶ **The Point**

Wisdom is grounded in trust in God.

▶ **The Passage**

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

▶ **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.

▶ **The Setting**

While Solomon gained incredible wealth, he is best known for his amazing wisdom. In 1 Kings 3, God appeared to Solomon and offered him anything he wanted. Solomon chose wisdom. So, God answered his request, giving Solomon a “a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:12). So, when Solomon began searching for purpose in wisdom, his insights and conclusions carried a great deal of weight. In a world mired in foolishness, we need to grasp the advantages—and limitations—of wisdom.

What does the Bible say?

The same event (2:14)—
Despite their differences,
the wise person and the fool
both face death. This is the
common fate of all humanity
(Heb. 9:27).

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

^{2:12} 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.

^{7:23} 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.

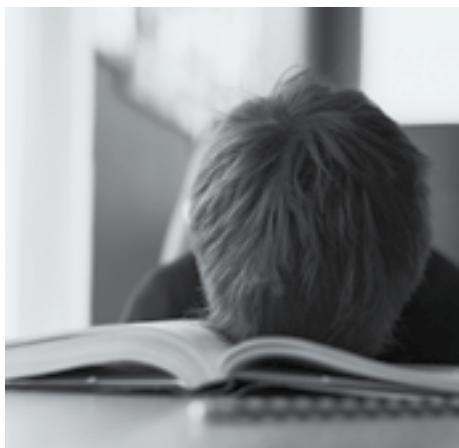
²⁶ And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. ²⁷ Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things— ²⁸ 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.

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

Notes



ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL): In advance, write on a whiteboard or poster, “Words of Wisdom.” As group members arrive, provide markers and instruct them to write some words of wisdom, parental instruction, life experience, or something else they were taught that they have hung on to (such as, “If a job is worth doing, it’s worth doing right”).

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 29 of the Personal Study Guide (PSG): “When

have you seen common sense make more sense than book sense?” Allow time for each person to respond.

GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 30 of the PSG. Introduce a biblical understanding of wisdom by reading or summarizing the text—or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

LEADER PACK: Refer to **Pack Item 2**, the “Solomon” handout. Remind group members that if human wisdom could have brought lasting satisfaction in life, Solomon would have certainly had it.

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” on page 30 of the PSG: “Wisdom is grounded in trust in God.”

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking the Lord for the wisdom to trust in Him. Thank Him for granting us wisdom from heaven when we ask.



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STUDY THE BIBLE

NOTES

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.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 on page 31 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: **Question #2** on page 31 of the PSG: **"Why is human wisdom inadequate for life's biggest problems?"**

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the main points from page 32 of the PSG. 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.**
- 2. Whether we live a good life or a wicked life, we all still die and are forgotten.**
- 3. Trying to live a righteous life apart from God only leads to frustration and grief.**

TRANSITION: Wisdom has its advantages, but by itself, it is not enough. In the next verses, we learn that wisdom also has its limits in our finite minds.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
How does our culture's view of wisdom differ from biblical wisdom?

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17 Commentary

[Verse 12] Even in today's postmodern culture, Solomon is often equated with wisdom. So, it seems natural that the king would turn to **wisdom** during his search for purpose and meaning. Specifically, he wanted to understand the contrast between wisdom and **madness** or **folly**. It's important to understand the difference between wisdom and knowledge. Solomon wasn't just examining things he could learn in a book. He was interested in how humans practically apply what they know to make the world better—and, thus, find meaning in life.

[Verses 13-14] Initially, Solomon recognized wisdom **is more gain** over foolishness, like the advantage light holds over darkness. Darkness is often used in Scripture to symbolize evil, while light represents what is right. Wisdom aligns with all that is good and righteous. The wise tend to see problems coming and can avoid them—or at least prepare for them. In contrast, fools consistently land in trouble because they are caught off-guard when life knocks them over. To emphasize this, Solomon provided a wise saying. The basic idea is wise people see what stands in front of them. Their **eyes** are put to good use because light surrounds them. But fools walk **in darkness**. They stumble with no sense of direction. But despite its benefits, wisdom cannot change some things in life. Most notably, it cannot stop death. While wisdom is better than folly, neither the wise nor the fool make it out of this life alive.

[Verse 15] Solomon asked a reasonable question: *If everyone ends up dead, why should anyone go to the trouble of pursuing wisdom?* From a human perspective, attempting to be **so very wise** makes little sense—better to have fun and live with reckless abandon. If this is true, wisdom mirrors the emptiness Solomon found elsewhere. It is **vanity** to exert too much energy into doing things the right way. While this might sound shocking, remember what Solomon was doing in Ecclesiastes. He sought to prove the validity of godly wisdom by taking the opposite view to its logical extreme. As with other things, wisdom without God is just another version of folly.

[Verses 16-17] Solomon continued to ponder the senseless nature of trying to find meaning and purpose through wisdom. Besides dying, neither wise nor fool leaves a significant mark on history. **Of the wise . . . there is no enduring remembrance.** In the end, the wise person has nothing that outlasts the contributions of a fool. Since that's the case, what is the point of investing so much into wisdom? Those who lean toward intellectual pursuits often want to make a difference in the world. They want to be associated with something that will live long after they die. But the more Solomon thought about the lack of a meaningful legacy, the more he struggled to find any purpose in wisdom. After taking a closer look at the potential of wisdom, Solomon was forced to come to a familiar conclusion: On its own, without the presence of God giving it life and power, wisdom meant nothing. It had some benefit, but those benefits weren't enough to make chasing it worthwhile. Like everything else, it was **vanity and a striving after wind**.



10 minutes

STUDY THE BIBLE

Notes

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.

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 7:23-25 on page 32 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use the Commentary for these verses on the next page of this Leader Guide to understand how Solomon recognized that a large part of what makes us human cannot be found through study or examination.

RECAP: 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.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 32 of the PSG: **“Since wisdom is beyond us, why do we keep pursuing it?”**

RECAP: 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.

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we see that the wisdom we need comes from pursuing God and living righteously.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

When have you found human wisdom to be limited?

Ecclesiastes 7:23-25 Commentary

[Verse 23] Ecclesiastes 7 begins with a string of wisdom pearls. Solomon recognized the difference between those who are wicked and those who are righteous (vv. 15-22). To gain more understanding of these groups, he decided to filter his observations of these two groups through wisdom. He resolved to use wisdom as the standard for all his research. It didn't take long for him to realize he was not up to the challenge. Despite his God-given discernment, some things were beyond his ability to grasp. Humanity's sin nature made explaining human conduct impossible. Even the wisest man in history struggled to explain the hold sin has on the human race. In our culture, individuals turn to science to explain much of what goes on around us. But being able to sequence DNA strands or look deep inside the human brain through magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) can only take us so far. When we ignore God, we ignore the most real part of human life—what is eternal. And ignoring God never leads to satisfactory answers or meaning in life.

[Verse 24] The Teacher recognized that a large part of what makes us human cannot be found through study or examination. In fact, what really makes us tick as a race is **far off, and deep, very deep**. No microscope is powerful enough to see inside our hearts and minds; no surgery can reveal our motivations. Solomon's question—**Who can find it out?**—seems simple enough. No human will ever be wise enough to explain everything about humanity. Solomon, the living definition of wisdom, admitted it was more than he could handle. If he could not do it, no one else could either. However, this confession of our own inadequacies should not leave us in despair. Instead, it should drive us to the One who already understands all we are and all we do. Again, Solomon's goal throughout Ecclesiastes is to point readers to God as the Author of all meaning and purpose. His question has only one possible answer: the Lord. He alone can discover (and uncover) humanity's true condition. As a result, He alone can meet our deepest needs for satisfaction, contentment, and purpose.

[Verse 25] Having acknowledged many things were out of his reach, Solomon still did his best to apply himself to learning about wisdom. He **turned my heart** to know as much as he could about humanity. He emphasized this point with other powerful words like **search out** and **seek**. He persevered in using the wisdom God gave Him and in trying to find answers to humanity's biggest questions. The words translated **the scheme of** has its roots in arithmetic and can refer to mathematical calculations. In a sense, Solomon would do his best to make things add up correctly. He discovered wisdom reveals the devastating consequences of folly. Using words like **folly** and **madness**, Solomon shone a light on the irrational character of human behavior dominated by sin. Following after wickedness robs us of common sense and pushes toward a type of spiritual insanity. While wisdom cannot answer every question life offers, it can provide solid and safe guidance when empowered by the God who made us, knows us, and loves us.



STUDY THE BIBLE

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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.*

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Ecclesiastes 7:26-29 on page 33 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 34 of the PSG: **“What are some ways you have discovered godly wisdom?”**

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 34 of the PSG: **“How can our group help one another gain and maintain godly wisdom?”**

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the main points from page 34 of the PSG. Though Solomon’s quest to find meaning by pursuing wisdom proved impossible, his search produced three conclusions:

1. **Sin affects our relationships.**
2. **Wisdom is rare in this world.**
3. **All humanity is sinfully corrupt.**

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity, “God’s Sense Makes Sense” on page 35 of the PSG to help them see how human wisdom falls short.



Consider a conversation you might have with a friend who has not trusted in Christ. How would you briefly address the following topics? [Several are listed in the PSG.]

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: **“Wisdom is grounded in trust in God.”**

ALTERNATE QUESTION:
What biblical principles for seeking wisdom can you recall from the New Testament?

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Ecclesiastes 7:26-29 Commentary

[Verse 26] Solomon turned attention to a specific folly: infidelity in marriage. It might seem Solomon was speaking down to women, accusing them of greater sin or immorality than men. However, it is better to see his words in the context of a man writing to a predominantly male audience. He was not making a general statement about women. Instead, he warned against the way sin destroys relationships between men and women. God ordained marriage as the most intimate of all human interactions, but the folly of sin creates chaos in this sacred institution. Though everyone dies at some point, these traps are even **more bitter. Snares and nets** were used to capture animals; **fettters** represented slavery. Both were weapons in the hands of a foolish woman. Individuals who fall into these traps might not physically die, but meaning and purpose are certainly sucked out of their lives. Just as important as identifying the trap is knowing how to avoid it. Solomon noted the only way of escape is obeying the Lord's plan for life. Like an umbrella in a storm, trusting Him and pursuing righteousness offers shelter and protection for **he who pleases God**. They are kept safe and can live out their purpose.

[Verses 27-28] Wisdom led Solomon to understand that people are not islands unto themselves, so he made the effort to connect with others on a level that would provide some purpose and meaning. He discovered that this was easier said than done. His words imply that whenever he came across someone who raised his hopes, those expectations were eventually dashed. He noted that his **soul has sought repeatedly** for fellowship, but he never really found anyone with whom he could create a lasting bond. While verse 28 sounds like men have a slight advantage over women, it is best to understand Solomon as disillusioned with both genders. Despite having hundreds of wives and concubines, Solomon never found peace in those relationships. Instead, they pulled his heart away from God (1 Kings 11:3-4). But it would be silly to believe Solomon found any more security or satisfaction in his relationships with other men. In the grand scheme, **one man among a thousand** is not substantially better than zero. Even rare strong relationships with others still fall short of providing the kind of peace and purpose that comes from a relationship with God.

[Verse 29] The Teacher closed this section on pursuing wisdom with a two-pronged statement that still rings true today. First, he noted that **God made man upright**. The opening chapters of Genesis make this clear. Once He was done creating, God found everything to be "very good" (Gen. 1:31). However, as Solomon pointed out, things changed quickly. After enjoying unlimited fellowship with their heavenly Father, Adam and Eve **sought out many schemes**. They rebelled against their Creator, and humans have been following their example ever since. That's why it's foolish to leave God out of the equation. He is the only One who can reverse this march toward depravity. Wisdom and relationships are important, but they lack meaning and purpose without His involvement. As with many other things Solomon investigated, they are empty and futile without Him.

A previous *Biblical Illustrator* article "The 'Fool' in Wisdom Literature" (Fall 2005) relates to this lesson and can be found on the DVD in the Leader Pack or can be purchased at www.lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator. Look for Bundles: Bible Studies for Life.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

GUIDE: Direct group members to page 36 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the following applications to carry out this week.



Notes

Dotted lines for taking notes.

- ▶ **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.

Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the final paragraph from page 36 of the PSG:

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.

PRAY: Conclude by thanking the Lord for the wisdom He gives us in Christ. Ask Him for the courage to share that wisdom with others.



Grow with other group leaders at the [Groups Ministry blog](#).

LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry