

5.

III. GREAT KNOWLEDGE IS VANITY

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

- A. *Then I turned to look into knowledge and craziness and folly (2:12-14a),*
1. *Because what the man who comes after the king [does is] what he has done already (2:12b).*
 2. *And I saw that knowledge has an advantage over folly like light [has] an advantage over darkness (2:13-14b).*
 - a. *The informed man's eyes [are] in his head (2:14a),*
 - b. *But the fool walks in darkness (2:14b).*
- B. *And yet I know that one happening comes to both of them (2:14c-17).*
1. *So I said to myself, "What happens to a fool will overtake me also (2:15)*
 - a. *Why then have I so thoroughly informed myself (2:15b)*
 - b. *When this also is vanity (2:15c)?*
 2. *Memory of an informed man [does not last] for an age; just like the fool (2:16).*
 - a. *By which [we know] that in the coming days all will be forgotten (2:16b)*
 - b. *And how does the informed man die? With the fool (2:16c).*
- C. *So I hated life (2:17).*
1. *Because to me the work that is worked under the sun is evil (2:17b).*
 2. *Because all of it is vanity, grabbing at the wind (2:17c).*

The third topic Solomon discussed that he found to be futile and empty was great knowledge. The Hebrew word that is translated "knowledge" above is an extremely versatile word. It refers to using the mind in a positive way to deal with life. It means having understanding or insight that enables a person to deal successfully with his or her challenges. It is correctly translated into English as "wisdom." However, the word has several shades of meaning that describe different approaches to gaining understanding.

(1) Sometimes the word refers to understanding that comes from observing others or from practice. In that case it refers to a skill that is important in handling a certain trade or circumstance, and it can be translated "know-how."

(2) At other times the word refers to understanding that comes from reason or rational analysis of a problem or challenge. In that case it means philosophy or logic and can be translated "learning."

(3) Sometimes the word refers to understanding that comes from experimentation or testing to find

what works. In that sense it refers to the scientific method, though that method was not defined and refined until recent centuries. In such cases, it can be translated "discovery."

(4) Most often, the word refers to understanding how to deal with people in a way that solves problems, eases tensions, and produces harmony. In that case, it means diplomacy or counseling and can be translated "advice."

All of the uses of the word mean "wisdom," and it is usually translated that way in English. The task of the reader becomes discerning which shade of meaning the writer had in mind when he used the word.

The word was used in Ecclesiastes 1:16,17,18 to describe what Solomon sought with his wide-ranging investigations. He was looking for skill to solve problems and improve life on the earth. Unfortunately, he learned that no one possessed those skills. In this passage, Solomon seems to use the word to refer to understanding that is gained by reason and logic. He spoke of a person who had eyes in his head (v. 14a), which seems to mean he

had enough information to see what was taking place and to know what to do about it. The knowledge he had gained enabled him to see what to do. He also referred to his putting effort into knowing how to act effectively instead of foolishly (v. 15b), which is best understood to refer to information that enabled him to solve a problem. Therefore, the word is translated “knowledge” in verse 13 above to indicate knowing how to handle situations when they arise. It means being armed with adequate information.

Solomon discussed knowledge gained by reason from two points of view:

Verses 12-14b. *Knowledge is better than foolishness.* Solomon first spoke of the positive side of knowledge that comes from reason. He said that, in order to discover the value of thoughtful knowledge, he looked into what knowledge produced and compared it with what foolishness produced. He sought to discover the difference in the results of a serious, thoughtful approach to life and the results of a playful, fun-loving approach to life.

Solomon said he wanted that information because “the man who comes after the king” does what “he has done already.” The man who comes after the king is the next king in line. The new king has to continue the duties and activities that the king before him performed, so it is wise for him to learn from what the previous king did. Solomon himself must have been “the man who came after the king,” because he was king and he came after his father King David. He wanted to know how the previous king had acted so he could learn from his example. If the previous king acted seriously and thoughtfully, he could judge by the results of that king’s actions whether he should do the same. If the previous king acted playfully and thoughtlessly, he could see the results and guide his actions accordingly.

Solomon said his observations enabled him to see that gaining information and acting in light of that knowledge was better than acting carelessly or recklessly. He certainly would have reached that conclusion by studying his father’s example. He judged that acting with adequate knowledge was as

much better than acting on feeling or emotion as light is better than darkness. The man who has gathered sufficient information is like a man who has eyes and is able to see where he is going. The knowledge he has gained enables him to see into the situation and offer a viable solution. On the other hand, the man who acts spontaneously is blind and walking in darkness. He hasn’t studied enough to know what to do and gropes blindly for an answer. Solomon’s conclusion was that knowing what a person is doing is far superior to playing through life like it is only a game.

Verses 14c-16. *The end of the knowledgeable man and the foolish man is the same.* Solomon then turned to the negative side of knowledge that comes from reason. He said that in the end the knowledgeable person is no better off than the person who plays through life, because what happens to one also happens to the other. On that basis, he said knowledge was no better than foolishness for two reasons.

First, knowledge is no better than foolishness because the end of both is the same (v 15). He meant one will die as surely as the other. Specifically, he said what was going to happen to the fool was going to overtake him also. Obviously he considered himself to be the knowledgeable man, and it depressed him that he was going to come to the same end as the fool. He was going to die just like the foolish man was going to die. Since his death was just as sure as the foolish man’s death, he wondered why he had put so much energy into getting informed. In the end all that study, reasoning, and philosophizing was vanity. It accomplished nothing.

Second, knowledge is no better than foolishness because the informed man will not be remembered any more than the foolish man (v. 16). Solomon was aware that the informed man was not going to be remembered for an age, just like the foolish man was not going to be remembered for an age. Soon everything about both of them was going to be forgotten. He asked, “How is the informed man treated when he dies?” He answered, “Just like the fool.” His implication was, “Both are buried, and both are forgotten.”

Verse 17. *I hate the way life treats knowledge, turning it into vanity.* Solomon's said his conclusion about the value of studying to gain great knowledge made him hate life. He did not mean he hated being alive. He meant he hated the way life worked. He expressed it as, "***the work that is worked under the sun.***" To him the way life worked wasn't fair. He used a strong word about it. He said it was "evil". He resented it that a man could spend his life studying, reasoning, and learning and end up just like a man who never has a serious thought in his whole life. To Solomon, it was just wrong.

As unfair as life is, Solomon was right about the end result as great learning. The professor dies and

is forgotten just as surely as the playboy who turned life into a foolish game. All of the knowledge the thoughtful man gathered turns to dust along with his body. He cannot pass it on in a package. It is just lost and gone. The reason is that gaining great knowledge is a human effort and just as temporary as every other work of man. That very reality is what drives people to seek for something more in life than what people can do. Solomon did not say it until the end of his book, but what drives away the gloom of the unfairness of life is that a way exists to change the end result of people's lives. A way does exist to turn despair into hope and death into life. Solomon gives that way at the end of the book: ***Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the all-in-all for a man*** (Eccl. 12:13b).