

THE LIMITS OF HUMAN WISDOM

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 2:12-16; 7:1-8:1

Leo Douma

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I want you to image a man doing his doctoral studies. He has gone back to university and has spent four years in full time study. He had to give up his work, and his wife has been working to support him. It has been difficult for the family. The research he has done has been very extensive. He has written a very lengthy thesis. Let's say his thesis title is 'The Human Social Implications of the Mating Habits of the Praying Mantis'. But now as he gets towards the end of his study, the man begins to have his doubts. He begins to doubt the relevancy of his study. He begins to feel that his conclusions add up to nothing. His big book with all its research is just going to lie on the university library shelf and gather dust. Probably never read. Certainly, never used for any application. All the time and energy and sacrifice will add up to nothing of significance.

This doctoral student with his meaningless dissertation gives us a sense of how the Teacher in Ecclesiastes feels. The Teacher describes himself (1:12) *"I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom ..."*. The Teacher is implying that he has conducted a very serious study. It was a huge undertaking. He describes his research as the attempt to gain wisdom by examining everything. (1:13,14) *"I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. ... I have seen all the things that are done under the sun..."* The words 'study' and 'explore' in the Hebrew represent two kinds of searching. One is 'penetrating in depth' and the other is 'going out broadly'. So, the teacher is concerned with both detail and breadth, the closeup and wide angle shot. You note how he stresses twice *"...all that is done"*. So, he makes sure we understand it was a very extensive study. But he has set a boundary on the research. Note also how he repeats *"...under heaven"* (13) and *"...under the sun"* (14). We said last week that the phrase *"...under the sun"* meant 'Let's assume there is no God above the sun. Let's just think about life here on earth, under the sun, without any reference to God.' So, the Teacher has investigated everything, except the revelation of God and the values of God. His is an in-depth study, very thorough, from a purely horizontal human point of view.

The researcher saw himself as great man. He wasn't just a doctoral student. He was the Professor. The expert. He had access to resources that others did not have. He grew in wisdom way above all others. (1:16) *"I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in*

wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." He is alluding to Solomon, the wisest of all men. Solomon possessed a greater intellect, more wealth and a richer life experience than anyone. So, his research and conclusions are reliable and trustworthy. The Teacher tells us that he ensured a balanced approach to his study. He didn't start with a particular bias. He tried to understand both sides of an issue. (1:17) *"Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly..."* (2:12) *"Then I turned my thoughts to consider wisdom, and also madness and folly."* So, you get the picture. The Professor conducted a thorough and balanced study, all without any reference to God.

Before we look at the results of his study we need to be clear what the Teacher means by 'wisdom'. Wisdom in the Bible is about learning from human experience the best way to do things. It's not just theoretical but immensely practical for daily living. It's about discretion, carefully weighing things up rather than acting impulsively. It refers to the familiar and ordinary things of life. Wisdom is often stated in clever proverbs like; 'Too many cooks spoil the broth', 'Many hands make light work'. So, wisdom is to discover what works well and what does not. It's to find out what makes life good. And what is dangerous and so to find ways to avoid the danger. For example, over the years of road accidents in Australia, we have worked out that it was better to limit the number of passengers in a car and have them all wear seat belts. Some countries have not gone in that way. With wisdom we can make life safer, more secure and enjoyable.

From that perspective the Teacher says human wisdom does have its place. (2:13,14) *"I saw that wisdom is better than folly, just as light is better than darkness. The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness..."* Wisdom enables a person to live intelligently. You can think through the consequences and see what is coming and avoid foolish mistakes. In a sense the wise person is 'in the light'. They have 'eyes in their head'. Those lacking wisdom just blunder in and suffer for it. The value of all our science and technology has raised our standards of living. We have learned from experience over the centuries how to build better homes. We have made better laws for our safety and justice. We have gained a better understanding of the human character and our psychological development. We have worked out cures for many diseases. The higher the education we receive the greater our opportunities for work and dealing with the issues of life. So, wisdom helps us get along better in life. It helps us avoid dangers that could ruin us. The teacher even provides a list of the insights that wisdom gives for life. (Chapter 7). Things like: maintaining a good name: (:1) *"A good name is better than fine perfume..."*. Seeing the value of sorrow (:2-4) *"It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone;*

the living should take this to heart. Frustration is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure". In other words, mourning makes us look at life more seriously. We face reality. Just having fun is often a cover for not really confronting the hard issues in life. Wisdom helps us realize the value of accepting a wise person's rebuke (:5) *"It is better to heed the rebuke of a wise person than to listen to the song of fools. Like the crackling of thorns under the pot, so is the laughter of fools."* Or the value of patiently pursuing the conclusion of a project (:8) *"The end of a matter is better than its beginning, and patience is better than pride."* In any culture, in any age, no matter their religion, parents have told their children to maintain a good reputation, to work hard and not just going out, about doing a job properly and finishing it. It all makes good sense.

Now, what is the conclusion to the Professor's research into wisdom? (1:14) *"I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind... (1:17) Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind"*. That's his conclusion. It's all 'meaningless'. The Hebrew word there is 'hebel' which means a 'vapour', like the breath on a cold frosty morning. It's there momentarily and then gone. It's a bag full of nothing. A 'chasing after the wind'. Our first reaction might be to say 'That's too negative. Think of all the good that has come through science and technology. Think of how life has become so much better, so much safer, so much fairer through all the things we have learned from our experience.' But remember this is the Teacher's final conclusion; the ultimate outcome. The Teacher will concede that wisdom has a lot of value in this life. But ultimately, eternally, it has no lasting value. 'Under the sun', without God, after death, it all comes to nothing.

He says (1:13b) *"What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind!"* The Hebrew can read 'What evil God has given us'. This is echoed in what Paul wrote in Romans 8:20-21 *"For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God"*. Our burden, that which messes up everything, is our own sinfulness, and the fact that the creation itself is broken by sin. It's what God has laid on us for our human rebellion. But even in our sinful state we still have that urge as human beings to search for truth. We desire to look for knowledge and wisdom. It is part of our being made in God's image. But if we reject God, reject his teachings, we will never find the ultimate truth. We will always end up short, frustrated. (1:15) *"What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted."* In all our studies to find answers to life's problems, we soon realize

how little we have achieved. 'You cannot count what is not there'. On the one hand we have achieved so much with our science and technology. But on the other hand, we just don't seem to get anywhere with the things that really need to be changed. There is so much that needs to be corrected in our world. The hatred, sickness, injury, terrorism, war, drought, famine, injustice and ultimately death. We can put men on the moon and send probes to Mars. We can clone sheep and create artificial intelligence. But we can't seem to solve the issues of domestic violence and child abuse. We haven't resolved homelessness and we are losing faith rapidly in our politicians. There are more refugees and slaves in the world than ever before. *"What is crooked we cannot straighten"*.

The sad fact is the more you study and learn the more depressing it is. That's because you become aware of just how much wrong there is in the world. And how little you can really do about it. (1:18) *"For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief."* Even for the person who has gained a lot of wisdom, what is the value of all that study for themselves? In the end their lot is the same as the fool. They both die and are forgotten. (2:15-16) *"Then I said to myself, 'The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?' I said to myself, 'This too is meaningless.' For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die!"* Death is the great leveler. Both the wise and the foolish can die by accident or sickness or a terrorist act or just old age. So, what, really, is the ultimate gain of human wisdom 'under the sun'? If you deny God, where does your wisdom get you in the eternal scheme of things? Be honest and face it!

The Professor makes us feel very inadequate, doesn't he? That is good! Again, that is his intention. His approach is exactly what we need in our culture that says 'We have no need of God. We can work it all out with our technology and smarts'. The Professor says 'Really? That's not what my research says!' He provides a blunt reality check. That's what we need to do before we can present the gospel. Challenge the current worldview and let people see where it really leads. When we are ready to admit we don't have all the answers, then we are ready to look elsewhere to someone who has. In other words, Jesus. As the Apostle Paul says (1 Corinthians 1:24) *"...to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."* Jesus is the one who provides the answer to all the world's problems. That's because he has overcome sin. Sin is the cause of all our human suffering. And Christ has paid its penalty. Jesus has overcome death, the curse that reduces everything to 'a passing vapour', 'meaninglessness'. Paul admits (1 Corinthians 1:23) *"...Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles..."* There are plenty of philosophers

and scientists who stumble over the gospel and think its all foolish. Just think of Richard Dawkins and his book 'The God Delusion'. But if people dare to be as honest, as the Teacher here in Ecclesiastes, they will realize their need for something more. For all our science and street smarts, more people today, than ever, feel there is no purpose to their lives. Hugh MacKay, Australia's leading social researcher, says in his latest book 'Reimagining Australia' '... despite 26 years of uninterrupted economic growth, Australia is experiencing a worsening societal crisis. Income inequality is widening, we no longer trust our political leaders, and people are more anxious and socially fragmented than ever.' Underpinning all the various things that have gone wrong, is the most basic fact that we have lost contact with God. We have an emptiness, an anxiety, a deep longing for home and a place we are loved and valued. And ultimately that place is with God, our maker. The void in us, the desire for an answer, finds its fulfilment in Jesus. It is in Christ that we are forgiven and brought back into a right relationship with God. We are brought back to the point and meaning of life. As Proverbs (9:10) says, "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*" It is in God that we have the ultimate wisdom of life. In Christ we have the final answer to the problems of life. Already the effects of his forgiveness and the hope it brings are experienced by those who believe. And the answer will be fully revealed when Jesus returns. Hope is there for all. But it won't be found until we admit 'life without Jesus is ultimately meaningless'.