

Ecclesiastes 1:12–18 | “Is Wisdom the Answer?”
Preached on March 8, 2026 by Pastor Matt Brown

You can turn in your Bibles this morning to Ecclesiastes 1, verse 12. *[pause]*

We are a couple messages into our series in the book of Ecclesiastes, and here we are finishing out chapter 1 already. *[pauseeee]*

Is human wisdom and knowledge the answer to life’s biggest questions? *[pauseeee]*

Some people would say, “Yes!” *[pause]*

In our day of ever-increasing knowledge, where we have vast amounts of information at our fingertips, we think that our wisdom and knowledge are the key to everything. *[pause]*

We tend to think this way because we *do* have more answers to things that previous generations were confused about...

We have learned so much more about the human body, so we can prevent or cure many more illnesses. *[pause]*

We have gained more knowledge about the universe and how many things work, and this makes it *feel* like we can progress to the point of knowing it all. *[pauseeee]*

John F. Kennedy once said, “Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education...The human mind is our fundamental resource.”¹ *[pause]*

Isn’t that interesting? “The human mind is our fundamental resource.” *[pause]*

The implication is that knowledge is our hope, and so as long as we can “progress in education,” then we will “progress as a nation.” *[pauseeee]*

Former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, made this even more explicit when he said, “Education is the great equalizer of our time. It gives hope to the hopeless...”² *[pause]*

As you can see, to many people education is the hope for humanity, and this kind of thinking is ingrained in our culture’s worldview. *[pause]*

They think, “If only everyone was more educated, then we wouldn’t face this or that.”

It’s this thinking that believes that human knowledge and wisdom will lead to peace on earth. *[pauseee]*

¹ John F. Kennedy, Special Message to the Congress on Education (February 20, 1961). Found at: <https://libquotes.com/john-f-kennedy/quote/lbv4y0f>.

² <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/rebuilding-our-relationships-each-other-planet-and-technology>.

What's interesting is that this understanding of knowledge has also been ingrained *in us* to some degree. *[pause]*

How often do you say to yourself, "If only I just knew more..." *[pause]*

So, "If only I just knew more, my child wouldn't be suffering right now," or, "If only I knew more, I would be more successful and happy." *[pauseeee]*

Is it true that human wisdom and knowledge are our hope? *[pause]*

Should we continue to think, "If only I had more knowledge..."? *[pause]*

Well the author of Ecclesiastes, living thousands of years ago and writing under the inspiration of the Spirit, sought to test out that theory.

And the passage that we have before us is his experiment and conclusion on the matter. *[pause]*

Let's see what he says. *[READ 12-18]*

The author sets out on a task, and it's this...

I. The task: use wisdom to find the answers to life's biggest questions. (12-13a, 16-17a)

How do you act when you have a task to do? *[pause]*

Some people may drag their feet or procrastinate.

Others are so intent on getting a task done that they become focused, zeroed in, and ready to tackle it. *[pause]*

I know that I can be focused on my task list because I enjoy that feeling of checking it off the list.

Well the author of Ecclesiastes sets out on a task, and he did not put it off, but was intent on seeing it accomplished. *[pause]*

His task or mission was to use wisdom to find the answers to life's biggest questions. *[pause]*

Would it work? Let's see how his mission unfolded. *[pauseeee]*

What we will do is we will methodically work through this task, seeing who did it, how he went about with it, and what his goal was.

So first: who did this task. *[pauseee]*

He says in verse 12, "I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem." *[pause]*

Now why is it important that Solomon mentions his kingship in relation to his task? *[pause]*

The reason is because a king has certain power to look at or investigate things.

He has power, authority, resources, and so much more to look across his kingdom to see the truth. *[pause]*

He's looking at "all that is done under heaven," so who else has the opportunity and resources to do that, other than a king? *[pauseeee]*

Next, this is no typical king, but this is a king with *surpassing wisdom*. *[pause]*

There are a lot of foolish kings, but this is not one of them.

For in verse 16, he says, "I have acquired great wisdom, surpassing all who were over Jerusalem before me." *[pause]*

If anyone is qualified to use wisdom to seek answers, it is the one with surpassing wisdom! *[pauseee]*

In the Bible, we are told that Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom, and God says to him in 1 King 3:12...

"Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you." *[pauseee]*

Solomon had amazing wisdom, so this endeavor to see if wisdom was the answer is *legitimate*. *[pause]*

This is no fool trying to see if wisdom is the answer, nor some ordinary guy, but this is a person with surpassing wisdom.

I'd say that he's qualified to do such an experiment, wouldn't you? *[pause]*

He is someone who verse 16 says, "had great experience of wisdom and knowledge."

He is uniquely qualified to test wisdom, and God raised him up to be wise, and inspired him to write this for our edification. *[pauseeee]*

So who set out to do this task? King Solomon. *[pause]*

Now, we will look at how he went about his task, and what we see is that his task was an *investigation*. *[pause]*

He says in verse 13, "I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven." *[pauseee]*

He's a man on a mission, seeking answers.

He's an explorer and investigator. *[pause]*

This is no half-hearted endeavor, but twice in this passage he says that he *applied his heart* to do this. [pause]

He was focused and concentrated on this mission—he truly tried to find the answer! [pauseeee]

Get this—he even examined the opposite of wisdom, just to make sure. [pause]

In verse 17, he says, “And I applied my heart to know wisdom and to know madness and folly.” [pause]

This shows us that Solomon’s investigation was *thorough* and *comprehensive*.

He not only sought out everything done under heaven, but also looked into if madness and folly were the answer. [pauseeee]

Any good investigator will tell you that your investigation has to be thorough—you must leave no stones unturned, but must consider *every* possibility. [pause]

That’s what Solomon did: he investigated the opposite of wisdom, just to be sure—talk about a thorough investigation! [pause]

This is no amateur, who is trying to tell us what he found, but this is an intentional, wise, thorough, powerful king, who has examined this. [pauseeee]

Now the question is: what was the *goal* of his investigation? [pause]

We are told in verse 13 that it was “to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.”

And then he tells us in verse 14 that he saw everything done under the sun. [pause]

This demonstrates that the author is looking at all of life and trying to make sense of it all. [pause]

It’s like he’s investigating the big question, “What is life’s purpose and meaning?”

He’s trying to find the answers to things like, “What makes life worth living?” or, “What human achievement can bring lasting value?” [pauseee]

Is it over here? [pause]

What about over there? [pause]

Look over at what that person is trying, is that the answer? [pauseeee]

Aren’t those the questions that we all have?

Each and every human has big questions like that. [pause]

At some point in our lives, we wonder about these things.

So do not feel like you are unique or odd because you have wondered about these things, but realize that you are in good company with the wisest person to have ever lived. *[pauseee]*

The most ardent atheist in the world deep down wonders, “What is life’s purpose and meaning?” *[pause]*

Even a child will sometimes ask, “What makes life worth living?”

This is because it doesn’t make sense to just exist for no reason. *[pause]*

The extent of the globe, the beauty of creation, the complexity of our bodies, the intricate details of life, and so many other things, push us to think, “There must be more!” *[pauseeeee]*

Know that the wisest king who has ever lived investigated this matter with extreme focus and concentration.

So I’d say that we’d better take this seriously and listen to what he has to say about it. *[pauseee]*

Now what is the writer’s conclusion after his investigation?...

II. The conclusion: wisdom doesn’t ultimately provide the answers. (13b–15, 17b-18)

This past week, I was trying to get rusted screws out of something. *[pause]*

I first tried to use a screwdriver, but the screw wouldn’t budge, even though I used all of my strength. *[pause]*

I then tried a drill, but again, no luck.

So I chose to go with some vice grips, maybe that would be the answer—nope. *[pause]*

I got some WD-40, sprayed it, let it soak, and tried once again...

Guess what? It didn’t work! *[pause]*

Eventually after much effort, I was able to loosen the screws, but then the clip inside got stripped, so the screws just kept spinning without coming out!

Let’s just say that it wasn’t fun. *[pausee]*

Have you ever faced a situation where you tried something and after so much effort you realized that it’s not the answer? *[pause]*

Well that’s what happened with the author of Ecclesiastes.

He put lots of effort into finding out whether human wisdom was the answer to life’s biggest questions, but came to the point, like I did with those screws, where he said...

“That’s not going to work. It’s not it.” *[pauseeee]*

The wisest person to have ever lived came to this conclusion with human wisdom and knowledge...

He tried it out, and found it wanting, yet so many are trying the same thing that he did. *[pause]*

They are trying to say that human wisdom and knowledge are the key to our hope.

They are trying to say that if only we had more knowledge, we would have all the answers. *[pause]*

See? The author was right when he wrote back in verse 11, “There is no remembrance of former things.”

People are trying things investigated before because in our pride we think we know better.

And it’s time to humble ourselves, and look at what the wise Preacher found. *[pauseeee]*

In verse 14, Solomon gave the conclusion to his task: “I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind.” *[pause]*

He looks out at everything and says that it’s all vanity! *[pause]*

He tried to use human wisdom, but it didn’t provide the solution because it just led him back to the reality that life under the sun is like a vapor.

It’s this paradox and enigma still, even using the most wisdom that a man ever had. *[pauseeee]*

A part of what he found is described in verse 15, “What is crooked cannot be made straight.” *[pause]*

What he’s saying is that life has a certain “crookedness” to it that mankind cannot straighten.

It’s not like humans can use their wisdom to fix the crooked nature of things, but that’s the way that life *is*. *[pause]*

Don’t you feel that life has a ‘crookedness’ to it? *[pause]*

The reason is because of the Fall—Adam and Eve sinned against God, which led God to curse this world.

So things are now broken, bent, and bowed because of our sin. *[pause]*

The world isn’t straight nor smooth, but crooked.

Things go wrong, time and time again, and sorrow, pain, exhaustion, and frustration ensue. *[pauseeee]*

“What is crooked cannot be made straight.” *[pauseeee]*

We can't straighten out everything that's crooked in this world through human insight.

We can't ever say, “We have the key, and it's through our knowledge, now the world will be made right!” *[pause]*

You think that, and you will be disappointed, for Solomon tried it years ago. *[pauseeee]*

We are like people trying to straighten out a crooked steel beam with our bare hands—it's not going to work.

That is why human wisdom cannot be our ultimate hope, for it's limited in what it can do. *[pause]*

We will never reach a utopia utilizing our own wisdom and knowledge. *[pauseeee]*

The author adds something else he found, for he says, “and what is lacking cannot be counted.” *[pauseee]*

Let's say that someone only gave you a couple pieces of a puzzle, and then asked you, “How many total pieces is this puzzle?” *[pause]*

You wouldn't be able to do it because you are lacking the pieces!

How can you count puzzle pieces that you don't have? *[pause]*

What's lacking can't be counted. *[pause]*

You are missing crucial information, so there's no way that you can give an accurate answer.

And that is what life is like—it's like trying to count something that you don't have. *[pauseee]*

This is why we are continually perplexed by life because we don't have all the answers.

We are trying to make sense of a 1,000 piece puzzle while holding only a handful of pieces. *[pauseeee]*

Have you ever been bombarded with questions that you have no idea the answers to?

Isn't it overwhelming, frustrating, and make you feel helpless? *[pause]*

We long for all the answers, but there are way more questions than answers, and it can be frustrating. *[pause]*

The author of Ecclesiastes felt this same thing, and so that's why he realized that human wisdom and knowledge *aren't* the answer.

They can't make straight what's crooked or give you what's lacking. *[pauseeee]*

This ‘crookedness’ and ‘lack’ in the world are a part of what makes life so hard...

He says in verse 13, “It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with.” *[pause]*

That word translated as ‘unhappy’ is a word that points to how life is often grievous, miserable, and unpleasant. *[pause]*

If you don’t think this is true at times, then you are living in denial.

Life is hard because it’s bent out of shape, and we experience a lack of answers to make sense of it all. *[pause]*

What an unhappy business to live in this fallen world—we go through pain, suffering, loss, tears, and confusion. *[pause]*

Solomon is honest with life, and he doesn’t shy away from giving us a clear picture.

But amidst this picture, he doesn’t lose sight of the sovereignty of God. *[pause]*

He says that this ‘unhappy business’ has been given to us by God. *[pause]*

Now the question is “Why?” *[pause]*

Well it goes back to the Fall.

It’s not that God set out to give us this experience from the beginning, but actually, when you look back to Genesis, God set out to give us utmost good. *[pause]*

He created everything and called it ‘good’.

Adam and Eve were in close relationship with Him, and they were provided for, and were really and truly happy. *[pause]*

So then when did this “unhappy” aspect come in? It’s after they sinned. *[pause]*

They sinned against God, and the consequences were pain, sorrow, animosity, and much more. *[pause]*

Now, God has given to us the unhappy business of living life in a fallen world, without being the author of sin.

It’s *our* fault for this situation, not God’s, yet He has sovereignly given it to us as a consequence of our rebellion. *[pause]*

Let’s not lose sight of the fact that God is still in control, though. *[pause]*

Though this world is crooked, lacking in answers, and often grievous, it is NOT out of control.
[pausee]

Oh, may we never forget that truth!

This fallen world and all of its pains and sorrows and tragedies will tempt you to think that it's a world of ungoverned chaos.

But that's not true—even the 'unhappy business' that we face is under the watchful eye of the Lord! *[pause]*

He's not wringing his hands in fear, saying, "How did it get this bad, I don't know what to do now."

No, He gave this situation to us as a result of our sin. *[pausee]*

Truly, this world is crooked and we lack all the answers—it is a world abounding in unhappy tasks. *[pauseee]*

So is human wisdom and knowledge the answer to these problems?

The resounding answer from Ecclesiastes is "No." *[pause]*

Wise, powerful Solomon tried it out and found it wanting.

In fact, at the end of this passage in verse 17, he says that after trying out wisdom, madness, and folly, "I perceived that this also is but a striving after wind." *[pause]*

Even the wisest person saw that human wisdom as an end in itself was like striving after the wind.

It doesn't provide you with the answer, for in the end, you will only end up with a fist full of nothing. *[pausee]*

Human wisdom and knowledge don't provide you with the answer or solution that you want.

And actually, he says that, "In much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow." *[pausee]*

What he's saying is that in some ways, wisdom and knowledge increase your frustration. *[pause]*

More wisdom brings more 'vexation'—it's this feeling of being troubled, irritated, or frustrated. *[pause]*

More knowledge brings more 'sorrow,' which points to the anguish and grief that we feel. *[pause]*

The reason is because the more wisdom you possess, the more unanswered questions you have, so the more frustrated you become. *[pause]*

You increase in knowledge, and then you end up increasing in sorrow because you know about more brokenness around you. *[pauseeee]*

The wisest person there was, saw the limitation of human wisdom and knowledge.

Do you think you'll be different? *[pause]*

Are you that haughty and prideful that you think that your wisdom and knowledge will crack the code and solve it all? *[pause]*

No...

Human wisdom is not the answer to life's biggest questions.

Human wisdom and knowledge are limited in what they can provide. *[pause]*

They will not help you make sense of all of life. *[pause]*

It is not the key that unlocks the door of mystery, for Solomon tested that theory, and it failed.

It is NOT the hope of humanity, like many people believe. *[pauseeee]*

Are you someone who thinks, "If only the world had more knowledge, then there would be peace on earth"? *[pause]*

Are you someone who thinks, "If only I had more knowledge, then I would have all the answers, and all my problems would be solved"? *[pause]*

Realize that this passage is pushing you to see that it's not the answer.

In fact, he shows us that at the end of the search for wisdom and knowledge is a cry of frustration. *[pause]*

But here's the thing—that cry of frustration is meant to lead us to a cry of desperation, where we reach out to God and the wisdom and knowledge that comes from Him. *[pauseee]*

God intends the limitations of human wisdom and knowledge to push us to Him. *[pause]*

As we become vexed and sorrowful with the limits of these things, we are led to say, "What's the answer?!"

And God says in His Word, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding."³ *[pauseeee]*

³ Proverbs 3:5.

It's then that we can look beyond the sun, and see that there's a wisdom from above,⁴ which we need. *[pause]*

In the wisdom of God, He made foolish the wisdom of this world, for He “chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise...so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”⁵
[pause]

What specifically did He do?...

He chose to save us through the cross of Christ, which many see as foolish, yet we see as the power and wisdom of God. *[pauseeee]*

The Son of God came to this world, and took on flesh.

He became one of us in order to save us from our sins, for He died for our sins on the cross, taking our place there. *[pause]*

He then rose again victorious three days later.

And through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are saved! *[pauseeeee]*

Let's no longer boast in human wisdom, nor think it is our hope, but let's look to the wisdom of God, which this world often considers 'folly.'

For we are those who know the powerlessness of human wisdom, and have seen and experienced the power and wisdom of our God through Jesus Christ. *[pauseeeeeee]*

Yes, we face a fallen world that makes life grievous, and a crooked world, where we don't have all the answers.

But God through Christ Jesus has a plan for the renewal of all things. *[pause]*

Through Christ, He made the way for our sins to be forgiven, and our relationship with Him to be restored.

And someday He will make straight what's crooked, and provide the answers to what's lacking. *[pauseeee]*

So amidst this fallen world, what should we apply our hearts to know?

Let's apply them to know Christ and His wisdom, the wisdom from above.

⁴ James 3:14–18 uses this phrase.

⁵ This and what follows comes from 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.