

Learning from Solomon's Experience #2

Ecclesiastes 1:12-18; 1 Corinthians 10:12

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Rev. Greg L. Price

What is wisdom? Is wisdom simply knowing a lot of information about the world around us? Is a wise man merely one who gives good advice? Is wisdom just an ability to quote a lot of Bible verses or to discuss a theological topic? In various ways, all of these ideas fall short of what God says biblical wisdom is as we shall see from the Scripture this Lord's Day.

God's own testimony concerning the wisdom Solomon possessed is given to us in 1 Kings 3. Solomon, who became the sole ruler over Israel upon the death of his father, David, knew all too well his own inherent inadequacy to rule righteously and wisely over God's people, Israel. God appeared to Solomon in a dream by night and commanded Solomon, "Ask what shall I give to thee." Solomon did not ask for riches or honor, but rather pled with God to grant him an understanding heart to discern between good and evil. God was so pleased with Solomon's request that God responded to Solomon in the amazing words that we find in 1 Kings 3:11-13: Read them. God's own testimony, not man's testimony, was that no man before him or after him (except Christ of course) had possessed or would possess the wisdom graciously bestowed upon Solomon.

Now with that degree of wisdom granted by God to Solomon, there is a question you must have asked yourself. If Solomon was so wise, how did he fall into such foolishness as having seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines whom he permitted to lead him into gross idolatry (according to 1 Kings 11:1-8)? Dear ones, no matter what gifts and graces God gives to you, if you turn away from daily communing with Christ and obeying His commandments and rather set upon a course to walk after your own self-centered and sinful ways, you will fall into gross sins despite the gifts and graces given to you by God. David, a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), was exalted in pride and fell into adultery and murder. Abraham, the friend of God (James 2:23), was so overcome by fear that he forsook his wife before Pharaoh and Abimelech in order to save his own neck. Peter was given the faith to actually walk upon water as if he were walking upon a paved road, and yet he fell into unbelief and had to be rescued a few moments later by Christ from drowning in the sea. "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Dear ones, none of us (regardless of the gifts and graces bestowed upon us) are immune from falling into gross sins and being greatly humbled before God and man if we do not walk in faith and obedience to Christ. In fact, the very gift we have received from God may be the very means that God will use to bring us from our own exalted self-importance. That is why it may be said of Solomon that though he was the wisest man that ever lived (apart from Christ), he nevertheless became the most foolish man that ever lived. For no one has fallen from the heights of wisdom from which Solomon fell. When we forget our Savior and live in unrepentant disobedience to Him (beginning with our corrupt desires and leading to our filthy words), we set ourselves up for a very big fall. Let us learn from Solomon's experience in order that we not repeat his experience time and time again in our own lives. Solomon lived to tell us about his experience. We, however, may not live to tell others about our own experience, if we walk the same path.

This Lord's Day we continue with our study through the inspired Book of Ecclesiastes. Last Lord's Day we covered the first main point from our text in Ecclesiastes 1:12-18: Solomon Gives Himself To Investigate Human Activities To Find Joy (Ecclesiastes 1:12-15). This Lord's Day we shall cover (by God's grace) the second main point from our text: Solomon Gives Himself To Know both Virtue and Vice To Find Joy (Ecclesiastes 1:16-18).

II. Solomon Gives Himself To Know both Virtue and Vice To Find Joy (Ecclesiastes 1:16-18).

A. As noted in the sermon preached last Sabbath, we have moved in Solomon's argument here in Ecclesiastes Chapter One from that which is more general in the realm of the natural world to that which is more personal in Solomon's own experience, in order to demonstrate the vanity of all things in this life apart from faith in and communion with Jesus Christ. The first matter that Solomon personally observed (which we noted last week) was that Solomon gave himself to a study of all the activities, employments, and pleasures of man "under the sun" (who seek to find joy from a mere earthly perspective), and all Solomon could discover by way of his thorough investigation was that all of man's activities were both physically and mentally exhausting, with nothing by way of true happiness to show for it. It was all ceaseless activity and meaningless movement, as it relates to finding a peace of mind and contentment of the soul that endures.

B. Solomon now moves in the second main point of his personal investigation to find where true joy lies, from the activities of man (in Ecclesiastes 1:12-15) to the virtues and vices of man (in Ecclesiastes 1:16-18). Solomon thought, "If certain existential and experiential activities in our lives will not bring lasting joy, then perhaps it is the pursuit of rational thinking in understanding the difference between wisdom on the one hand, and madness and folly on the other hand that will bring true joy in this life. Perhaps it is not so much the actual activity that one experiences that brings happiness as much as it is how one defines the goodness or badness of that activity that will bring true satisfaction in life. It's not what one experiences, but what one brings to the experience that brings true joy and happiness." Solomon is moving closer to the truth (no doubt) in the direction that he herein pursues. It is not prosperity or poverty that brings joy. It is not good health or poor health that brings contentment. It is not being married or being single that brings satisfaction. It is something much deeper that must be present in man, so that whatever he experiences, he may yet find joy. Solomon now turns his attention to wisdom and foolishness or virtue and vice.

C. Having concluded that true joy was not to be found in the mere activities of man (in Ecclesiastes 1:12-15), Solomon "communed" (or spoke) with his own heart concerning this matter of wisdom (in verse 16). In other words, Solomon began to talk to himself, meditate upon, or reflect back and forth about wisdom being the key to true joy.

1. Solomon spent time reflecting on this matter. He did not simply act and react. He "communed" with himself. He sat down with himself, and went through the difficult process of critical analysis and evaluation.

2. Dear ones, we are given so much to sensation and experience in our lives, and here we find a healthy warning to us all. Yes, sensation, experience, using all of our senses to enjoy what God has given to us is a great blessing. However, this word of caution is also necessary. Our sensations, experiences, or emotions must not lead us, even if they do accompany us. It is our knowledge of, understanding of, faith in, and love of Christ and His will that must lead us into joy, peace, and contentment. Let's consider a couple applications of this principle.

a. So many professing Christians are led astray today in the churches that they attend, because they are led by their sensations, their experience, and their emotions. It feels good to them, so they embrace it. The tingle down one's spine, or the answer to a prayer, or the change in a person's life, or the "gift" to speak in a new language, or the quality of the band that leads the music, all become benchmarks on the part of many professing Christians by which to judge the faithfulness of a church. But dear ones, these and many more like sensations or emotions do not a faithful church make. The same sensations or emotions might be drawn out from the testimony of those in many false and unfaithful churches. What is right is determined by what God declares in His holy and loving commandments, which are found in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Therefore, we must increase in our knowledge and understanding of God's

Word, if we would not be misled by our sensations, experiences, and emotions into error. The moment we place our capacity to judge rightly in that which we sense and experience, we set ourselves up for deception. Of course, there is a place for sensation, experience, and emotion in the life of the Christian, for God has given us richly all good things in this life to enjoy. But beware of being led by emotion, rather than by knowledge of the truth. Commune with yourself concerning the Word of Christ (and with others who are faithful and mature Christians as well).

b. The second illustration of being led by sensation and emotion rather than by knowledge and understanding relates to how we respond to people when we are offended by what they say or do. One who merely acts and reacts and does not take the time to commune with his own heart from a thoughtful reflection upon God's Word will be much more likely to say something or do something that he/she will later regret. Ask yourself when you are offended, "How would God in His Word call me to respond to that remark or that gesture?" If you are not sure, then the wiser choice is to say nothing or to do nothing until you know how you should respond. And usually, time gives the mind a chance to kick in where the emotions have been solely operating. Dear ones, passion is good, but passion and zeal must be led by knowledge and understanding of God's Word, or we will be always shooting from the hip and injuring a lot of people unnecessarily in the process (doing more damage to the Cause of Christ, because our emotions are not under control). Let us take time to commune with our own hearts, reflecting upon the Word of God before responding to others.

D. Let us next consider what it was that Solomon communed with himself about? "Lo, I am come to great estate, and have gotten more wisdom than all they that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge" (Ecclesiastes 1:16). Solomon reflected upon two things in his own personal experience that he set out to investigate, in order to see if true joy might be found in them: his great estate and his great wisdom.

1. Solomon's great estate. Certainly no king, judge, ruler, or nobleman in Jerusalem ever equaled (let alone exceeded the) wealth of Solomon (1 Kings 10:23,27). Although he mentions his great wealth here as one item that he reflected upon, Solomon spends no time discussing it at this time (this he will do in Ecclesiastes Chapter 2). Sometimes we might reflect to ourselves or to others, "If I only had the money to take this or that vacation, to buy this or that item, I would find peace and contentment." Solomon had no limitations to what he might have or to where he might go, because he was the wealthiest man on the face of the earth at that time. And yet apart from Christ, it did not bring him the joy for which man seeks. It was all vanity and emptiness.

2. Solomon's great wisdom. Solomon now turns to reflect upon his great wisdom and knowledge as being that which will bring an enduring satisfaction in the heart of man. Just as there was no equal to his wisdom in Jerusalem, there was no equal to his wisdom in all of the world (1 Kings 4:29-31; 1 Kings 10:23,24). If wisdom and knowledge could bring a man true happiness, Solomon should have been by all accounts the happiest person that ever lived—for he was the wisest man that ever lived (except for Christ).

E. Solomon then states in Ecclesiastes 1:17, "And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly." Solomon embarked upon a philosophic journey to know and understand the virtue of wisdom and the vices of madness and folly in order to find where the pearl of true joy and contentment might be buried. Solomon first gave his heart to know wisdom.

1. What is wisdom?

a. First, let us look at what wisdom is not. Wisdom is not the mere mental acquisition of knowledge and truth. Knowledge of the truth may either humble a man, or puff up a man in pride. Knowledge of the truth may be used to make a man holy or used to make a man haughty. Now I do not mean to disparage or disregard knowledge of the truth at all, for biblical knowledge certainly is the foundation

upon which biblical wisdom is built. Knowledge is the root of wisdom, whereas wisdom is the fruit of knowledge. Just as the seed is related to the flower, so is knowledge related to wisdom. There is no flower without the seed, although there may be a seed without the flower. So likewise there is no wisdom without knowledge, although there may be knowledge without wisdom. I am sure you have seen many people who were filled with much knowledge, but did not know how to apply that knowledge to life, or who were so full of their own knowledge that no one wanted to hear their advice or counsel.

b. Second, let us now look at what wisdom is. Wisdom, as distinguished from mere knowledge, is the application of that knowledge to the world around you. It is not only knowing what is right, but it is doing what is right (James 3:13). A truly wise person is one who, from a faithful study of God's Word and application of God's Word to one's own life and experience, is able to give sound advice to others concerning various situations that might arise. This type of wisdom is ordinarily a grace in which we grow over a period of time. It comes through the steady and consistent application of God's truth to one's own life. Thus, there is always a humble application of the truth to others when giving counsel, because the wise person has had to learn the same advice he is giving to others. He has first preached the sermon to himself before he preaches it to others (as it were). He has first learned to walk the talk before he talks the walk to others.

2. God distinguishes in the Scriptures between two types of wisdom: an earthly wisdom and a heavenly wisdom—a human wisdom and a divine wisdom.

a. An earthly wisdom is based upon man's study, wherein he seeks to separate God and God's revelation from the world in which he lives. In other words, human wisdom looks at the world from a perspective in which Jesus Christ and His truth is omitted from its consideration and application of knowledge. The wisdom of this world will always fall short, because it is based upon a limited understanding of reality. Earthly wisdom is only a wisdom that is "under the sun" (from man's mere earthly perspective), rather than a wisdom that is above the sun (from God's heavenly perspective). This wisdom of the world will not bring joy and peace, because it considers salvation through Jesus Christ to be foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:20-26). The wisdom of this world is contained in mere words that cannot bring life, joy, and peace (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The wisdom of this world is proud and vain (1 Corinthians 3:18-21). The wisdom of this world is consumed in bitter envy and strife (James 3:14-16).

b. A heavenly wisdom is a grace (undeservedly bestowed upon believers in Christ), wherein they grow in applying the truth of Christ more and more to their own lives and to the lives of others. Wisdom from God not only includes Jesus Christ and His truth within its worldview, Jesus Christ and His truth defines its worldview. The wisdom of God is, therefore, not contained in mere words, but is powerful and brings life, joy, and peace (1 Corinthians 2:1-5). The wisdom of God is humble (1 Corinthians 3:18-21). The wisdom of God is consumed with peace, purity, gentleness, and mercy toward others (James 3:17).

3. So when we hear Solomon say that he gave himself to a study of wisdom, what type of wisdom did he give himself to investigate in bringing true joy? As amazing as it may seem, Solomon, who had been graciously given more heavenly wisdom than any man (except for Christ,) fell into such a backslidden state that he sought to find true joy not in a heavenly wisdom, but in a worldly wisdom. For Solomon concludes that his pursuit of this type of wisdom only brought "vexation of spirit", or a gnawing at the very soul of a man. From a personal investigation of this type of wisdom, Solomon was all the more vexed and afflicted in his spirit—not satisfied and content in his spirit. I am reminded of the disciples, who had been graciously and undeservedly given the power by Christ to heal and to deliver those possessed by demons, and who actually had performed such great and mighty miracles when sent out by Christ two by two, but who could not deliver a child possessed by demons due to their own lack of faith and prayer (in Mark 9). Just as these disciples left behind the source of their power (namely, Christ) to heal, so had Solomon left behind the source of his wisdom (namely, Christ). If you abuse it, you lose it (at least temporarily). Dear ones, what have you and I lost (as it were) of spiritual graces that we once possessed in more abundant measure because we have stopped looking in faith to Christ to supply what we need? Have we allowed our fears, our pride, our

business, our pleasures, our other loves to take our eye of faith off of Him alone, who is our strength, our wisdom, our righteousness, our joy, and our life? Solomon only found vexation of spirit in his search for joy, because he took his eye off of Christ and sought for joy in a worldly wisdom.

F. Also note that Solomon investigated not only wisdom as a virtue (apart from Christ), but also “madness” and “folly.” These two words represent that which is morally perverse and contrary to the commandments of God’s Word. In other words, Solomon did not limit his search for joy to that which was only a virtue from man’s perspective, but also included that which was a vice from man’s perspective. What types of sensual earthly vices Solomon has in view that he personally experienced, he does not say. No doubt the sensual pleasures of eating and drinking, acquiring great possessions, music, architectural beauty, sexual experiences, and pleasures of every kind (which are to some degree enumerated in Chapter Two must be included here). But this, too, did not satisfy, but only brought vexation of spirit. The more he sought for joy in all of these things, the more he was vexed, because he came up empty-handed each and every time as he sought for joy apart from communion in Jesus Christ.

G. Solomon’s conclusion to his personal investigation is found in Ecclesiastes 1:18: Read it. Rather than finding joy, he found grief and sorrow. His pursuit of worldly wisdom and of sensual madness and foolishness only increased his sorrow. The more he looked for joy in his possessions and in his worldly wisdom, the more discouraged he became.

Dear ones, it was, in fact, that sorrow that God used in Solomon’s life to lead him to true joy. Before there can be true joy, there must be true sorrow over our own sin. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Have you known such sorrow in your past searches for a lasting joy and contentment? Be thankful that your Savior, Jesus Christ, brought you to that point, so that you turned in faith to Him to find that peace and fulfillment that eluded you at every turn. Our God delights to turn sorrow into joy, and tears into laughing. If we see the purpose of sorrow in our life, we will never look at sorrow in the same way again. Oh the depths of God’s wisdom in His plan for His beloved children! As pain is necessary to our body (to tell us that something is wrong), so sorrow is necessary to our soul (to tell us something is wrong) if we are to know the comfort and joy of the Lord. Amen.

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