

The Bonfire of the Vanities
"Wisdom's Folly"
Ecclesiastes 1:12-18

Introduction

- [Slide #1] One of the greatest philosopher sages of our time is [Jack Handey](#).¹ Consider the depths of his wisdom...
 - It takes a big man to cry, but it takes a bigger man to laugh at that man.
 - The face of a child can say it all, especially the mouth part of the face.
 - When you go in for a job interview, I think a good thing to ask is if they ever press charges.
 - To me, boxing is like a ballet, except there's no music, no choreography, and the dancers hit each other.
 - Better not take a dog on the space shuttle, because if he sticks his head out when you're coming home his face might burn up.
 - Children need encouragement. If a kid gets an answer right, tell him it was a lucky guess. That way he develops a good, lucky feeling.
 - Sometimes, when I lie in bed at night and look up at the stars, I think to myself, "Man! I really need to fix that roof."
 - If you go flying back through time and you see somebody else flying forward into the future, it's probably best to avoid eye contact.
 - Whenever you read a good book, it's like the author is right there, in the room talking to you, which is why I don't like to read good books.
 - Most of the time it was probably real bad being stuck down in a dungeon. But some days, when there was a bad storm outside, you'd look out your little window and think, "Boy, I'm glad I'm not out in that."
 - For mad scientists who keep brains in jars, here's a tip: why not add a slice of lemon to each jar, for freshness?
 - It's sad that a family can be torn apart by something as simple as a pack of wild dogs.
 - It's funny that pirates were always going around searching for treasure, and they never realized that the real treasure was the fond memories they were creating.
 - How come the dove gets to be the peace symbol? How about the pillow? It has more feathers than the dove, and it doesn't have that dangerous beak.
- Do you know why I like [Jack Handey](#)? Beyond the fact that he makes me laugh? I like him because his satire reveals the underlying folly and absurdity of wisdom. When it comes right down to it, true wisdom, real wisdom, meaty wisdom, philosophical wisdom is no wiser than Handey's half-baked wisdom.

¹ *Deep Thoughts*, Jack Handey.

Transition

Turn to Ecclesiastes 1:12-18. Here's a *Deep Thought* for you. [Slide #2]

Proposition

- **The acquisition of wisdom and knowledge can't give meaning to life**
- In case you weren't here last week, let me give you a brief summary of where we are at. Ecclesiastes summarizes the words of Qoheleth or *the Teacher*. Like all of us, Qoheleth is on this quest for meaning in this life. His question? "Where in life, here on this earth, under the sun, can you find meaning and purpose and fulfillment?" And he makes an exhaustive search, he searches everywhere, he experiences everything he can to answer that question. He does it all. And he can't find meaning in anybody or in anything.² In fact, he comes to the conclusion that there is nothing under the sun capable of giving meaning to life. *"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."* It's all vanity.
- Now the underlying assumption of the book is that there is meaning. Life has meaning. But not *under the sun*—not on this earth. Meaning is found in relationship with God. By asking us to journey with him, Qoheleth does us a favor. Because most people still believe that life has some meaning if they can only find it. And so Qoheleth plumbs the depths of life without meaning so that we don't have to. He takes all the things we think provide meaning and purpose and satisfaction in this life and he throws them in the fire. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.
- The first thing to make the fire is wisdom and knowledge. To Qoheleth wisdom means three things: ingenuity, good sense, and rational intellect.³ If you think that by your own intellect or ingenuity or good sense you can bring meaning to life, forget about it. If you think that pursuing wisdom, knowledge, education, philosophy, degrees, letters after your name, will give meaning to life, you're mistaken.

Transition

This passage reflects on the reasons why.

Organizational Sentence

- **Two reflections on the folly of acquiring wisdom and knowledge**

Transition

The **first** comes from **verses 12-15**. Listen. *I, the Teacher, was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 13 I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on men! 14 I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. 15 What is twisted cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.* Wisdom and knowledge will never be able to give meaning to life because [Slide #3] **life is a puzzle without a solution.**

Main Points

² Longman, p. 65.

³ Fox, p. 73.

- Life is a twisted messed up puzzle. Have you ever dumped a jigsaw puzzle with a gazillion of those tiny little pieces on the floor and tried to make sense of it? What makes you think we can, by our own smarts, make sense of the incredible, infinite complexity of life? *What is twisted cannot be straightened.* The puzzle of life has no solution. Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, *Life's a corkscrew that can't be straightened, A minus that won't add up.*⁴
- Qoheleth tried. He studied exhaustively. He explored. *I devoted myself to study, he says, and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven.* And it burdened him. *What a heavy burden.* He tried to understand this puzzle called life. And it got him nowhere. Verse 14. *I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.*
- The quest for knowledge and has continued unabated for thousands and thousands of years. Philosophers come. Philosophers go. Scientists continue to learn but does their quest ever end? People a lot brighter than you and I have wracked their brains trying to figure out this thing called life and we are no closer to understanding things now than at the beginning. It is *chasing after the wind.* The deeper and smaller science delves the more complexity it finds. The farther the astronomer looks the smaller she feels. The puzzle will never be solved.
- Or as God reminded Job, “*Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. 5 Who determined its dimensions and stretched out the surveying line? 6 What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone 7 as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?*
- “*Have you ever commanded the morning to appear and caused the dawn to rise in the east? 13 Have you made daylight spread to the ends of the earth, to bring an end to the night’s wickedness? 16 “Have you explored the springs from which the seas come? Have you explored their depths? 17 Do you know where the gates of death are located? Have you seen the gates of utter gloom? 18 Do you realize the extent of the earth? Tell me about it if you know!*
- “*Can you direct the movement of the stars—binding the cluster of the Pleiades or loosening the cords of Orion? 32 Can you direct the sequence of the seasons or guide the Bear with her cubs across the heavens? 33 Do you know the laws of the universe? Can you use them to regulate the earth? 34 “Can you shout to the clouds and make it rain? 35 Can you make lightning appear and cause it to strike as you direct? 36 Who gives intuition to the heart and instinct to the mind? 37 Who is wise enough to count all the clouds? Who can tilt the water jars of heaven 38 when the parched ground is dry and the soil has hardened into clods?”⁵*
- All we can say is what Job said. “*I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. 5 I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say.*”⁶
- If you’ve chosen wisdom and knowledge as the means by which you hope to find meaning in this life, you’re in real trouble, really serious trouble. Because you won’t find what you’re looking for. You’re chasing after the wind.

Transition

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.

⁵ Job 38:4-7,12-13,16-18,31-38

⁶ Job 40:3-5

Look at [verses 16-18](#). Listen. *I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." 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. 18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.* There is a [second reason](#) why the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge can't give meaning to life. [[Slide #4](#)] **The pursuit only leads to sorrow.**

- Attempts to solve the problems of life by means of wisdom or ingenuity or good sense or intellect only enlarge the problem.⁷ This world is broken. The more you understand this world and how it works, the more you experience, the more you see, the more you know, the more you learn the more you ache.⁸ *For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.*
- Of all the people qualified to draw this conclusion Qoheleth was qualified. [Verse 16](#). *I thought to myself, "Look, I have grown and increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge."* He stockpiled wisdom. The point is, if he couldn't find meaning in or through wisdom, then who can?⁹
- And yet we keep trying. We keep chasing after the wind. We keep trying to find meaning in things incapable of providing any real and lasting meaning. It's not just wisdom or knowledge. We keep pursuing things that never satisfy. And all we end up doing in the process is multiplying our sorrows and regrets.

Conclusion

- [[Video](#)]

⁷ Eaton, p. 64.

⁸ Kidner, p. 64 quoting Moffatt.

⁹ Longman, p. 83.