

1 Corinthians 3:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain.

Analysis

And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain (ματαιοί εἰσιν, mataioi eisin)—Paul quotes Psalm 94:11 (slightly adapted). Mataioi (μάταιοι) means empty, futile, leading nowhere—the same term used in Ecclesiastes for 'vanity' (hebel, vapor/mist). God knows (γινώσκει, ginōskei)—not merely intellectually comprehends but experientially sees through—the dialogismous (διαλογισμούς, reasonings) of the wise.

Worldly wisdom's futility isn't obvious to practitioners—sophisticates believe their philosophies profound, their strategies effective. But divine omniscience penetrates pretense: God sees human wisdom as vapor, insubstantial and temporary. This echoes Ecclesiastes' verdict after exhaustive pursuit of wisdom, pleasure, and accomplishment: 'all is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Only wisdom beginning with 'fear of the Lord' has substance (Proverbs 9:10). Paul's double quotation (verses 19-20) from different OT books reinforces the point: Scripture uniformly testifies that fallen human wisdom, however brilliant, is ultimately empty and will be overthrown.

Historical Context

Psalm 94 is a prayer for justice against oppressors who think themselves too clever for divine accountability. The psalmist asserts God sees through human schemes. Paul applies this to intellectual arrogance: the Corinthians' prized philosophical

sophistication is as empty as the wicked plots in Psalm 94—both are 'vain' (futile) before God's omniscient gaze.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What 'thoughts' or strategies that seemed wise have proven 'vain' (empty, futile) in your life?
2. How does knowing that 'the Lord knows' your inmost reasonings humble intellectual pride and encourage honest dependence?
3. What wisdom traditions or intellectual movements today are widely celebrated but likely 'vain' from God's eternal perspective?

Interlinear Text

καὶ	πάλιν	Κύριος	γινώσκει	τοὺς	διαλογισμοὺς	τῶν
And	again	The Lord	knoweth	G3588	the thoughts	G3588
G2532	G3825	G2962	G1097		G1261	
σοφῶν	ὅτι	εἰσὶν	μάταιοι			
of the wise	that	they are	vain			
G4680	G3754	G1526	G3152			

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 94:11 (References Lord): The LORD knoweth the thoughts of man, that they are vanity.

Colossians 2:8 (Parallel theme): Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Romans 1:21 (Parallel theme): Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Psalms 2:1 (Parallel theme): Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?

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