

Ecclesiastes 1:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.

Analysis

Solomon describes his quest: 'And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.' The phrase 'gave my heart' (natati et-libi, נָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי) indicates wholehearted intellectual pursuit. The verbs 'seek' (darosh, דָּרַשׁ) and 'search out' (tur, תּוּר) suggest comprehensive, systematic investigation. Yet this pursuit is 'sore travail' (inyan ra, עֲבֹנָה רָע)—burdensome, painful occupation. The phrase 'God given' indicates divine appointment: God designed humans to wrestle with ultimate questions about meaning, purpose, and reality. This intellectual struggle is both privilege (capacity for wisdom) and burden (never reaching complete understanding). The verse teaches that pursuing wisdom is divinely ordained human vocation, though limited and sometimes painful.

Historical Context

Solomon's wisdom was legendary (1 Kings 4:29-34), giving him authority to describe wisdom's pursuit and limitations. Ancient Near Eastern sages similarly pursued comprehensive knowledge—Egyptian wisdom schools, Mesopotamian scribes. Yet Ecclesiastes uniquely acknowledges that this quest is 'sore travail'—difficult, burdensome, ultimately incomplete. The fall affected human cognition;

pursuing truth in a fallen world involves frustration and limitation. Yet the pursuit remains valuable—God designed humans as truth-seekers. The New Testament affirms this: 'we know in part' now (1 Corinthians 13:9) but will know fully in glory. The Reformers emphasized that while human reason is valuable, it cannot discover saving truth apart from revelation. Faith seeks understanding (Anselm), but ultimate wisdom comes through Christ (Colossians 2:3).

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How do you balance vigorous intellectual pursuit of truth with humble acknowledgment of human cognitive limitations?
2. In what ways is the quest for wisdom both privilege and burden in your experience?

Interlinear Text

כָּל עַל בְּחִכְמָה וְלִתְּרוּ לְדַר וְשׁ לִבִּי אֶת נָתַן
 And I gave H5414 H853 my heart H3820 to seek H1875 and search out H8446 by wisdom H2451 H5921 H3605

הַ וְאֵן הַשָּׁמַיִם תַּחַת בְּעֵשׂ הַ אֲשֶׁר
 H834 concerning all things that are done H6213 H8478 under heaven H1931 H8064

לְעֵנֹת וְהָאָדָם לִבְנֵי אֱלֹהֵי נָתַן כִּי עֲוֹן
 travail H6045 this sore H7451 And I gave H5414 hath God H430 to the sons H1121 of man H120 to be exercised H6031

בְּוֹ:
 H0

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 3:10 (References God): I have seen the travail, which God hath given to the sons of men to be exercised in it.

Genesis 3:19 (Parallel theme): In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Ecclesiastes 1:17 (Parallel theme): And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 7:25 (Parallel theme): I applied mine heart to know, and to search, and to seek out wisdom, and the reason of things, and to know the wickedness of folly, even of foolishness and madness:

Psalms 111:2 (Parallel theme): The works of the LORD are great, sought out of all them that have pleasure therein.

Proverbs 18:15 (Parallel theme): The heart of the prudent getteth knowledge; and the ear of the wise seeketh knowledge.

Proverbs 4:7 (Parallel theme): Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.

Proverbs 18:1 (Parallel theme): Through desire a man, having separated himself, seeketh and intermeddleth with all wisdom.

Proverbs 23:26 (Parallel theme): My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways.

Ecclesiastes 8:9 (Parallel theme): All this have I seen, and applied my heart unto every work that is done under the sun: there is a time wherein one man ruleth over another to his own hurt.