

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, דָרַשׁ) and 'search out' (tur, תָּרַח) suggest comprehensive, systematic investigation. Yet this pursuit is 'sore travail' (inyan ra, עַתָּן 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	בְּסֻכָּת	הַ	וְלֹא	לְדַרְךָ	וְשָׁ	לְבִבְרִ	אֶת	נֶתֶן			
And I gave	H5414	H853	my heart	H3820	to seek	H1875	and search out	H8446	by wisdom	H2451	H5921	H3605
אָשָׁר	H834	בְּגַעֲשָׁה	הַ	תִּפְתַּח	תִּפְתַּח	יְמִם	בְּשָׁמְמִים	H8478	הַ	וְאַיִן	H1931	
concerning all things that are done	H6213						under heaven	H8064				
לְעָבָדָה	H6045	וְעַבְדָּה	וְעַבְדָּה	וְעַבְדָּה	וְעַבְדָּה	וְעַבְדָּה	וְעַבְדָּה	H1121	וְעַבְדָּה	וְעַבְדָּה	H6031	
travail	H7451	this sore	And I gave	H5414	hath God	H430	to the sons	H120	of man	to be exercised		
בָּרוּךְ	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.