

Ecclesiastes 1:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I communed with mine own heart, saying, 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.

Analysis

Solomon's pursuit of wisdom leads to a paradoxical discovery: 'in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.' The Hebrew 'ka'as' (כַּעַס, grief/vexation) and 'makob' (מַכּוֹב, sorrow/pain) describe emotional and psychological distress. This isn't anti-intellectualism but honest acknowledgment that comprehensive understanding of reality brings burdensome awareness. The wise person sees more clearly the world's injustices, human sinfulness, creation's brokenness, and life's brevity—all producing grief that ignorance might avoid. Increased knowledge reveals problems that cannot be fixed (1:15), inequities that cannot be resolved, and mortality that cannot be escaped. The verse doesn't counsel deliberate ignorance but prepares readers for wisdom's painful side effects. Unlike modern Western culture that often equates knowledge with happiness and progress, Ecclesiastes recognizes that understanding fallen reality produces sorrow. This anticipates Paul's teaching that comprehensive knowledge awaits the eschaton: 'now we see through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12), and current partial knowledge should produce humility rather than pride.

Historical Context

Solomon's legendary wisdom (1 Kings 3:12; 4:29-34) gave him authority to speak about wisdom's burdens. His encyclopedic knowledge of natural phenomena, international affairs, and human nature meant he understood problems most people never perceived. The wise king saw through political flattery, recognized human mortality despite royal power, and perceived injustice others missed—all producing grief. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature generally promoted the pursuit of wisdom as unqualified good, making Ecclesiastes' nuanced assessment striking. Post-exilic Judaism, wrestling with theodicy and suffering despite covenant faithfulness, found in this verse validation that understanding God's ways doesn't eliminate pain. The New Testament affirms that earthly wisdom has limits (1 Corinthians 1:20-25) and that some knowledge produces pride rather than love (1 Corinthians 8:1). Church history confirms that profound thinkers often bear heavy burdens—Augustine's *Confessions*, Luther's struggles, Pascal's *pensées* all reflect wisdom's grief-producing clarity.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What burdens has increased knowledge and understanding brought into your life, and how do you carry these without succumbing to despair?
2. How does this verse challenge modern assumptions that education, information, and knowledge automatically improve happiness and well-being?

Interlinear Text

הִנֵּה הָאֵנִי יֹאמֵר	אֶנִּי יְדַבֵּר	עִם לִבִּי	לֹאמֵר	אֶנִּי יֹאמֵר	הִנֵּה הָאֵנִי
H2009	H589	H5973	H559	H589	H2009
	I communed	with mine own heart	saying		
	H1696	H3820	H559		
אֲשֶׁר כָּל עַל חֲכָמָה הַ	וְהוֹסֵף פָּתִי	הִגַּדְתִּי לִּי			
H834	H3605	H5921			
	and have gotten	Lo I am come to great estate			
	H3254	H1431			
יְרוּשָׁלַם	עַל	לִפְנֵי	הִנֵּה הָאֵנִי		
H3389	H5921	H6440	H1961		
	me in Jerusalem	than all they that have been before			
וְדַעַת:	חֲכָמָה הַ	הַרְבֵּה הַ	רָצָה הַ	לִבִּי יְ	
H1847	H2451	H7235	H7200	H3820	
	more wisdom	had great	experience	with mine own heart	

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 2:9 (References Jerusalem): So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.

1 Kings 4:30 (Parallel theme): And Solomon's wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt.

1 Kings 10:7 (Parallel theme): Howbeit I believed not the words, until I came, and mine eyes had seen it: and, behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard.

Hebrews 5:14 (Parallel theme): But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

2 Chronicles 2:12 (Parallel theme): Hiram said moreover, Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, that made heaven and earth, who hath given to David the king a wise son, endued with prudence and understanding, that might build an house for the LORD, and an house for his kingdom.

