

Ecclesiastes 1:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit.

Analysis

This verse describes Solomon's comprehensive investigation: 'I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly.' The Hebrew 'natati et-libi' (נָתָתִי אֶת־, לְבִ, gave my heart) indicates wholehearted, systematic pursuit—not casual curiosity but intentional examination. Solomon pursued understanding not only of wisdom but also its opposites: 'madness' (holelot, הָלֵלָה, reckless behavior) and 'folly' (sikhlu, סִכְלָה, foolishness). True wisdom requires knowing evil as well as good, foolishness as well as prudence—comprehensive understanding demands investigating all of reality. The verse's conclusion, 'this also is vexation of spirit' (re'ut ruach, רְעֵעַת רַעַח), reveals that even the pursuit of comprehensive knowledge proves frustrating. The quest to understand everything ultimately encounters the same limitation as other pursuits: human wisdom cannot grasp God's complete purposes (3:11; 8:17). This verse models intellectual honesty—the wise person doesn't selectively study only pleasant subjects but comprehensively examines all reality, including its dark corners. Yet even this noble pursuit proves ultimately unsatisfying when pursued as an end in itself rather than as a means to know God.

Historical Context

Solomon's wisdom included understanding human psychology and moral distinctions (1 Kings 3:16-28), scientific knowledge (1 Kings 4:33), literary skills (1 Kings 4:32), and international diplomacy (1 Kings 10:1-13). His investigation of folly likely included observing fools, experiencing the consequences of unwise choices, and perhaps his own later spiritual compromise (1 Kings 11). Ancient

wisdom traditions valued comprehensive knowledge—Egyptian and Mesopotamian sages studied astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and ethics. However, Ecclesiastes uniquely acknowledges that even comprehensive investigation has limits and produces frustration. The verse anticipates Paul's warning that knowledge pursued for its own sake produces pride (1 Corinthians 8:1), while true wisdom comes through revelation in Christ (Colossians 2:3). Church fathers like Augustine emphasized that pagan philosophy's pursuit of wisdom, though admirable, proved ultimately futile apart from divine revelation—only in Christ do 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' reside.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 – Characteristics of love

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. How does your pursuit of knowledge and understanding function—as an end in itself or as a means to know God more deeply?
 2. What have you learned from studying foolishness and human failure that wisdom alone couldn't teach you?

Interlinear Text

ושכל ות הולל ות יד עתִי סכָם ה יד עתִי לְבִי וְאַתָּה ה
And I gave my heart I perceived wisdom I perceived madness and folly

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 2:3 (Parallel theme): I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 (Parallel theme): Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

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