

Ecclesiastes 1:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.

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' (קָאֵס, grief/vexation) and 'makob' (מָקוֹב, 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

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

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

כִּי	בָּרְבָּרָה	חִכְתָּם	רָב	כָּעֵס	רָגִיעַ	יְמִינָה	דָּעַת
H3588	For in much	wisdom	H7227	grief	and he that increaseth	knowledge	
	H7230	H2451		H3708	H3254		H1847
רָגִיעַ	יְמִינָה	מִכְאֹבָה:					
and he that increaseth	sorrow						
H3254	H4341						

Additional Cross-References

Job 28:28 (Parallel theme): And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.

Ecclesiastes 7:16 (Parallel theme): Be not righteous over much; neither make thyself over wise: why shouldest thou destroy thyself?

Ecclesiastes 2:23 (Parallel theme): For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

Ecclesiastes 2:15 (Parallel theme): Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity.

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