

Ecclesiastes 2:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness.

Analysis

Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness—the Hebrew 'yitron' (יִתְרֹן, excelleth/profit/advantage) is Ecclesiastes' key term for comparative advantage. The verb 'ra'ah' (רָאָה, saw) indicates empirical observation. Solomon isn't theorizing abstractly but reporting discovered truth. The simile comparing wisdom to light and folly to darkness echoes biblical imagery throughout Scripture (Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 4:18-19; John 1:4-5; 8:12).

Wisdom provides clear, practical advantages over folly—better decision-making, foresight, skill in navigating life's complexities. Light enables seeing reality clearly; darkness leaves one stumbling. This verse affirms wisdom's real benefits, countering potential misunderstanding of Ecclesiastes' critique. The Preacher isn't anti-intellectual or dismissing wisdom's value. Rather, he's establishing that while wisdom excels folly relatively, both wise and foolish face the same ultimate fate—death (2:14-16). Wisdom provides temporal advantage but cannot overcome mortality's equalizing power. Only Christ, 'the true Light' (John 1:9) and God's wisdom personified (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30), provides wisdom that transcends death through resurrection.

Historical Context

Ancient Israel treasured wisdom highly. Proverbs, also attributed to Solomon, extensively catalogs wisdom's benefits—long life, prosperity, honor, peace (Proverbs 3:13-18). Egyptian wisdom literature (Instructions genre) and

Mesopotamian texts likewise praised wisdom's practical advantages. However, Ecclesiastes introduces a crucial qualification absent from most ancient wisdom literature: wisdom's benefits are real but limited. Death eventually equalizes all human achievement (2:14-16), and comprehensive wisdom increases sorrow by revealing problems without solutions (1:18). Post-exilic Judaism wrestled with this tension—Torah study was considered the highest good, yet suffering often afflicted the righteous. The New Testament resolves this tension through eschatology: wisdom pursued in Christ yields eternal rewards transcending death (Colossians 2:3; James 3:17-18). The Reformers emphasized that true wisdom begins with fearing God (Proverbs 9:10), not merely acquiring knowledge.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What practical benefits has wisdom provided in your life, and how do you keep those benefits in proper perspective without making wisdom itself an idol?
2. How does this verse's affirmation of wisdom's real advantages balance Ecclesiastes' broader critique of wisdom's limitations?

Interlinear Text

כִּיּוֹתֶר וְזֶה הַסְּכָל וְתֵדֵן מִן לְפִנְצָמָת הַיּוֹתֶר וְזֶה שֶׁאָנִי וְכָא יְתִי

Then I saw H589 **that** H3426 **excelleth** H3504 **wisdom** H2451 **folly** H5531 **excelleth** H3504

מִן פָּאָרֶךְ: כַּיִתְרֹא מִן פָּאָרֶךְ:
as far as light H4480 **darkness** H2822

Additional Cross-References

Ephesians 5:8 (Light): For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light:

Ecclesiastes 11:7 (Light): Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun:

Matthew 6:23 (Light): But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

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