

Ecclesiastes 7:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence: but the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life to them that have it.

Analysis

For wisdom is a defence, and money is a defence (כִּי בְּצֵל הַחֲכָמָה בְּצֵל הַכֹּסֶף)—the Hebrew literally reads 'in the shadow of wisdom, in the shadow of money,' using 'tsel' (צל, shadow/shelter/protection). Both wisdom and wealth provide protective covering in this life, shielding from certain dangers and difficulties. The parallelism acknowledges money's legitimate protective function—it provides security, opportunities, and relief from material pressures.

But the excellency of knowledge is, that wisdom giveth life (וַיְתַרְוּ זֶעֶט הַחֲכָמָה)—the contrast word 'yitron' (זֶעֶט, profit/advantage/excellency) signals wisdom's superiority over wealth. While money preserves biological existence, wisdom 'giveth life' (techayeh, תְּחִיָּה, causes to live/preserves life). True wisdom—rooted in fearing God (Ecclesiastes 12:13)—grants vitality that transcends mere survival. This anticipates Jesus's teaching: 'Man shall not live by bread alone' (Matthew 4:4). Proverbs similarly declares that wisdom is 'a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her' (Proverbs 3:18). Paul contrasts earthly riches with 'the unsearchable riches of Christ' (Ephesians 3:8), whose wisdom brings eternal life (John 17:3).

Historical Context

Solomon, possessing both unprecedented wealth and God-given wisdom (1 Kings 3:12-13, 10:23), had unique qualification to compare their relative value. His

observation that both provide 'shadow' (protection) would resonate with ancient Near Eastern audiences familiar with the scorching sun—shade meant survival. Wisdom literature throughout the ancient world valued both material security and sagacious living. However, Ecclesiastes uniquely subordinates wealth to wisdom by emphasizing wisdom's life-giving quality. Writing late in his reign after experiencing how wealth without wisdom led to spiritual compromise through foreign wives (1 Kings 11:1-8), Solomon recognized that riches protected his body but wisdom would have preserved his soul. Post-exilic readers, often economically struggling yet faithful to Torah, found validation: covenant wisdom surpasses material prosperity. The early church embraced this hierarchy, as seen in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) and apostolic warnings against pursuing riches (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. In what situations have you observed that both money and wisdom provide protection, yet wisdom offers something money cannot?
2. How does viewing wisdom as 'life-giving' rather than merely protective change your motivation for pursuing biblical understanding and the fear of God?

Interlinear Text

כִּי	בָּצָל	בָּצָל	בָּצָל	בָּצָל	וְזַרְעָלָם
H3588	is a defence	For wisdom	is a defence	and money	but the excellency
H6738		H2451	H6738	H3701	H3504
of knowledge	For wisdom	giveth life	to them that have		
H1847	H2451	H2421	H1167		

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 3:18 (Parallel theme): She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her.

Proverbs 8:35 (Parallel theme): For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD.

Proverbs 2:7 (Parallel theme): He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly.

Proverbs 11:4 (Parallel theme): Riches profit not in the day of wrath: but righteousness delivereth from death.

John 12:50 (Parallel theme): And I know that his commandment is life everlasting: whatsoever I speak therefore, even as the Father said unto me, so I speak.

John 17:3 (Parallel theme): And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.

Judges 9:15 (Parallel theme): And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

Isaiah 32:2 (Parallel theme): And a man shall be as an hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Isaiah 33:6 (Parallel theme): And wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation: the fear of the LORD is his treasure.

Psalms 57:1 (Parallel theme): Be merciful unto me, O God, be merciful unto me: for my soul trusteth in thee: yea, in the shadow of thy wings will I make my refuge, until these calamities be overpast.

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org