

Ecclesiastes 8:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun: because though a man labour to seek it out, yet he shall not find it; yea further; though a wise man think to know it, yet shall he not be able to find it.

Analysis

Solomon's conclusion after observing divine providence is profoundly humbling: human wisdom has inherent limitations. The threefold repetition—"cannot find out," "shall not find it," "shall not be able to find it"—emphasizes the absolute certainty of human epistemological limits. The phrase 'all the work of God' (kol-ma'aseh ha'Elohim, **כל-מעשה הָאֱלֹהִים**) encompasses God's sovereign governance of history, providence, and redemptive purposes. 'Under the sun' (tachat hashemesh, **תְּחִתַּת שֶׁמֶשׁ**), used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, denotes earthly, temporal existence apart from divine revelation. The verb matsa (אָמַד, 'find out') implies discovering through human investigation and reason. Solomon acknowledges that even chakham (חָכָם, 'wise man')—those most skilled in understanding—cannot comprehend God's full purposes through natural observation alone. This doesn't promote anti-intellectualism but epistemic humility. God's ways transcend human wisdom (Isaiah 55:8-9). Only divine revelation unveils God's redemptive plan—supremely in Christ, 'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3). Ecclesiastes prepares readers to recognize humanity's need for revelation beyond human reason.

Historical Context

Ecclesiastes was likely written by Solomon around 935 BCE, late in his reign after his spiritual compromise through foreign wives (1 Kings 11). The wisdom genre flourished during Israel's united monarchy when peace and prosperity enabled philosophical reflection. Solomon's international reputation for wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34) provided authority for his observations about life's meaning. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature from Egypt ('The Instruction of Amenemope') and Mesopotamia addressed similar philosophical questions about life's purpose, but Ecclesiastes uniquely combines skeptical observation with covenant faith. The phrase 'under the sun' reflects an empirical methodology: what can be known through observation alone, apart from special revelation. Solomon's conclusion that human wisdom cannot fathom God's purposes would have challenged both ancient and modern hubris. In his era, wisdom was highly prized—kings employed counselors, sages studied natural phenomena, and philosophers sought ultimate truth. Yet Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived (1 Kings 3:12), acknowledged wisdom's limits. This historical humility prepares readers for the gospel revelation: God's 'foolishness' in the cross surpasses human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:20-25). True knowledge comes through Christ, not autonomous human investigation.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does acknowledging the limits of human wisdom protect us from both pride and despair?
2. What aspects of God's providence or purposes do you struggle to understand or accept?
3. How does this verse's emphasis on epistemic limits point us toward dependence on divine revelation?

4. In what ways does modern culture overestimate human ability to comprehend ultimate reality?
5. How does Christ as the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24) address the limitations described in this verse?

Interlinear Text

וְיָדָעָה	לֹא	יָדַעַת	וְיָרָאֵיתִי	כָּל	אֶת	אֶת	כָּל	הַמְּפֻעָשָׁה	בְּפִרְאָלָהִים	בְּפִרְאָלָהִים	כִּי	לֹא	לֹא	יָדַעַת	
Then I beheld				all the work				of God				cannot			
H7200	H853	H3605	H4639					H430	H3588	H3808		H3201			
a man	find out		H853	all the work		because		that is done							
H120	H4672			H4639		H834		H6213				H8478			
under the sun	though	because		labour		a man		to seek it out				H3808			
H8121	H7945	H834		H5998		H120		H1245							
find out			H1571	H518	man think		it yea further though a wise		to know			H3045			
H4672				H559				H2450				H3808			
cannot	find out														
H3201	H4672														
לֹא	לֹדֶת	עֲתָה	לֹא	לֹמֶצֶא	לֹא	לֹמֶצֶא	לֹא	לֹמֶצֶא	לֹא	לֹמֶצֶא	לֹא	לֹמֶצֶא	לֹא	לֹמֶצֶא	

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 3:11 (References God): He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end.

Psalms 73:16 (Parallel theme): When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;

Romans 11:33 (References God): O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!

Isaiah 40:28 (References God): Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.

Job 5:9 (Parallel theme): Which doeth great things and unsearchable; marvellous things without number:

Psalms 40:5 (References God): Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered.

Ecclesiastes 11:5 (References God): As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all.

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