

# 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, כָּל־מַעֲשֵׂה הָאֱלֹהִים) encompasses God's sovereign governance of history, providence, and redemptive purposes. 'Under the sun' (tachat hashemesh, תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ), used 29 times in Ecclesiastes, denotes earthly, temporal existence apart from divine revelation. The verb matsa (מָצָא, '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

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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

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**Romans 10:9** — Confession and belief for salvation

**John 3:16** — God's love and salvation

## Study Questions

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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

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וְכִּי־רָאִיתִי	אֶת־כָּל־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה	הָאֱלֹהִים	כִּי־לֹא־יֹכֵל	
<b>Then I beheld</b>	<b>all the work</b>	<b>of God</b>	<b>cannot</b>	
H7200	H853 H3605	H4639 H430	H3588 H3808	H3201
תַּחַת־נַעֲשֶׂה	אֲשֶׁר־הַמַּעֲשֶׂה	אֶת־לְמַצָּא:	הָאָדָם	
<b>that is done</b>	<b>because</b>	<b>find out</b>	<b>a man</b>	
H8478	H834 H4639	H4672 H853	H120	
וְלֹא־לְבַקֵּשׁ	הָאָדָם־יַעַמְלֵל	אֲשֶׁר־בְּשֵׁל־הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ		
<b>to seek it out</b>	<b>a man</b>	<b>labour</b>	<b>under the sun</b>	
H3808	H120	H5998 H834	H8121 H7945	
לֹא־לֵדַעַת	הַחֲכָם־יֵאמָר	אִם־יִגַּם־לְמַצָּא:		
<b>to know</b>	<b>it yea further though a wise</b>	<b>find out</b>		
H3045	H2450 H559	H4672 H1571 H518		
לֹא־יֹכֵל	לְמַצָּא:			
<b>cannot</b>	<b>find out</b>			
H3201	H4672			

## Additional Cross-References

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**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.