

The Emptiness of Knowledge

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[0 : 00] Over 20 years ago, I remember sitting at my brother's high school graduation, which if you're in elementary school is a pretty boring event. I don't remember as the graduation speaker got up. I don't remember most of what he said during his speech. I don't remember his name or what he did.

But I remember to this day one thing that the graduation speaker said because it really struck home to me when I was in elementary school. He said, you know, when you graduate high school, you think that you know and you've learned a lot about the world.

When you graduate college, you realize how little you actually know about the world. And when you graduate graduate school, you realize how little your professors know about the world.

Maybe that resonates with some of you as you've gotten various degrees in your education career.

This graduation speaker was articulating a great paradox about the pursuit of knowledge.

And it's a paradox that resonates a lot with our Old Testament reading this morning in Ecclesiastes chapter one. This week, our Old Testament lesson takes a bit of a detour in the book of Ecclesiastes.

[1 : 20] And we'll be making a brief pit stop there over the next two weeks. If you're not familiar with the book of Ecclesiastes, many people aren't, especially if you are not super familiar with going to church.

Ecclesiastes is a book in the Old Testament that fits within the genre of what we would call wisdom literature. Wisdom literature. And in the Old Testament, there's kind of two main styles or approaches of wisdom literature.

The first approach would be that of the book of Proverbs, where the book of Proverbs teaches us that there are norms. There are created norms in the world and in the universe.

And wisdom is about living according to those norms. Just as wood has a grain, wisdom is about aligning ourselves with the grain of the universe. But there's a second approach to wisdom literature that emphasizes that there are painful exceptions to this.

That in a fallen world, there are painful exceptions to the grain of the universe. It acknowledges the world we live in has been deeply broken by sin and things are unfair and unjust.

[2 : 31] There are all kinds of exceptions to the grain of creation. And the book of Ecclesiastes fits within this second approach to wisdom. So the book of Proverbs is going to sound a lot like this.

The righteous will prosper and the wicked will perish. And Ecclesiastes is going to sound like this.

Yes, but sometimes, maybe often, it's the wicked who prosper and it's the righteous who are oppressed.

Two angles, two approaches, two styles towards wisdom literature. And if you read the book of Ecclesiastes, you see that one of the central themes in the book is that life pursued under the sun, life in and of itself is futile, it's empty, it's meaningless, it's a chasing after the wind.

And this is an honest confession of someone who pursued life for all it's worth, who pursued life for all that it has to offer. The author of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon, inherited his father's throne, King David's throne.

And he was wealthy, he was powerful, he was brilliant. He knew it all, he had it all, he tried it all. He experienced everything that this life could possibly offer him.

[3 : 53] And at the end of the day, his conclusion was that life pursued in and of itself leaves you empty and feeling like everything is futile and meaningless.

And in the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes, we see his story. We see him recounting to us how he pursued things like wisdom and knowledge, how he pursued pleasure and happiness, how he pursued work and success.

And so our passage this morning focuses on Solomon's pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. That's what we're going to look at this morning. We're going to look at the emptiness of knowledge. And then next week, we're going to look at the emptiness of success.

But from Ecclesiastes 1, verses 12 through 18, we're going to look at two things. We're going to look at the futility of knowledge and the fullness of knowledge. The futility of knowledge and the fullness of knowledge.

So first of all, let's look at the futility of knowledge. Look at verses 12 through 13 in your bulletin or your own copy of God's word. Verses 12 through 13, Solomon says this. I, the teacher, was king over Israel and Jerusalem.

[4 : 58] I applied my mind to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under the heavens. Solomon gave himself to the life of the mind.

This is something that we see elsewhere in 1 Kings chapter 4, verses 29 through 34. It says this, that God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insights and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore.

Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the east and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He spoke 3,000 proverbs and his songs numbered 1,005.

He spoke about plant life from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also spoke about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. From all nations, people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom.

Solomon was what you might consider an ancient Renaissance man. He was the world's most famous philosopher and scientist and poet. He was Immanuel Kant and Stephen Hawking and Jay-Z all in one.

[6 : 09] He was the Renaissance man of his day. And what was his conclusion? After pursuing wisdom and knowledge, we see it in verses 14 through 15. He says, what a heavy burden God has laid on mankind.

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun and all of them are meaningless. A chasing after the wind. And if that sounds like a bit of a Debbie Downer, welcome to the book of Ecclesiastes.

Why does he conclude this? Well, he shares why he concludes this in two separate proverbs in chapter 1.

The first proverb goes like this. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted.

What is he saying in that proverb? Well, the first observation he's making about knowledge is this. That the more that we know, the more we realize how much we don't know.

[7 : 17] The more we know, the more we realize how much we don't know. What is crooked cannot be made straight. Just because we might know a lot about the world and how it works, doesn't mean that we know how to fix what's wrong with it.

We can, for example, we can know a lot about the science of weather. We could be an expert meteorologist, perhaps the smartest one in the world. But we can't stop Hurricane Helene from releasing destructive floods in the southeastern United States and destroying lives and families and entire towns.

Or think about something like poverty. You could get a PhD studying the economics and the sociology and the politics of poverty. But being a world expert on poverty doesn't mean that you know how to fix it.

For all we know about what the causes of poverty are, no one has ever been able to solve it. And the second half of this proverb restates the same thing in a different way.

Solomon says, what is lacking cannot be counted. What is lacking cannot be counted. Scientists understand this proverb. They understand that there are all sorts of things.

[8 : 29] There are all kinds of things that we know that we don't know. Let me give you an example. Caleb Scharf is a senior scientist for astrobiology at NASA.

He taught at Columbia University. And he wrote this article when the Scientific American were entitled, This is what we don't know about the universe. He says, it's easy for scientists to talk about all that we know about the universe, but what we often don't talk about is how much we don't know. And in this article he lists a lot of things about what scientists don't know. Let me list three. He says, first of all, we don't fully understand our own biology. He said, if we actually understood everything

about DNA and genetics, we'd be able to totally eliminate disease.

Of course, we haven't been able to do that yet. He said, secondly, in the field of math, we can't prove or solve many of our own mathematical conjectures or theorems.

There's a long list of unproven, unsolved problems and unsolved conjectures. And these are things that mathematicians rely on, and yet they can't even prove them.

[9 : 37] Third, he says, we don't really know what dark matter or dark energy is in the universe. He says, the matter, the stuff that you and I can see and feel and touch, only accounts for about 5% of what's in the universe.

He talks about this stuff called dark matter and dark energy, which is the remaining 95% of the universe. We know it's out there, but we really don't understand a lot about it or how it works. We have little to no idea about 95% of what exists in the universe. Now, this is incredibly humbling. It's incredibly humbling if you stop and think about it for a second. There are all kinds of things that we know that we don't know.

And this makes the pursuit of knowledge deeply elusive and deeply paradoxical. It's why Solomon says to pursue knowledge in and of itself is like chasing after the wind.

So that's the first observation that Solomon tells us about the pursuit of knowledge, that the more we know, the more we realize how much we don't know. The second observation that Solomon gives us about the pursuit of knowledge comes in verses 16 through 18.

[10 : 51] I invite you to look there with me. Verses 16 through 18, Solomon says, I said to myself, Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me.

I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge. Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom and also of madness and folly. But I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind.

For with much wisdom comes much sorrow. The more knowledge, the more grief. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow.

The more knowledge, the more grief. When I was a college student at the University of Maryland, I had learned throughout middle school, high school, I learned a lot about the civil rights movement. I thought I knew a lot about the civil rights movement in America. I learned up growing in school about MLKs. I have a dream speech about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott about Brown versus Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

[11 : 55] But then I took a class in college. It was one of my favorite classes. And the title of the class was called The Rhetoric of Black America. And it was in that class as a 20-year-old that I first learned about somebody named Emmett Till.

And I learned that his story was one of the primary catalysts for the civil rights movement that I thought I knew a lot about. If you don't know his story, Emmett Till is a 14-year-old black boy who grew up in Chicago who was visiting his family in Mississippi.

in the summer of 1955. And that summer, he was kidnapped. He was brutally murdered in the middle of the night. And his body was dumped into a river.

And in that class, we read the memoir of Emmett Till's mother, Mamie Till Mobley. And we read her deeply moving story about what it was like to be a mother to a son who was murdered because of hatred and racism and her gut-wrenching decision to put the picture of this casket on the front page of a newspaper so the whole world could see that this is what hatred does, this is what racism does. It was a heart-wrenching book. And it's the only book I remember reading in college that I remember sitting there and crying and weeping as I read it. I gained more knowledge.

[13 : 15] I gained more perspective, more wisdom about the Civil Rights Movement, but it was not a knowledge or a wisdom that made me happy. It was a knowledge and a wisdom that made me more sorrowful.

That's what Solomon is saying here. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow, and the more knowledge, the more grief.

Perhaps you can think of examples from your own life, your own expertise, your education, your training, your work, maybe classes you've taken, books that you've read, training you've received in your workplace.

Maybe you've experienced how the more knowledge you've gained, the wiser or smarter that you've become in a particular topic or a particular field, the more grieved you have become about how unjust and sad and terribly unfair the world is.

I love the way Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation, the message. He puts it like this. The more you know, the more you hurt.

[14:22] The more you know, the more you hurt. This is Solomon's conclusion. This is why he concludes that a life pursuing knowledge as merely an end in itself is an unsatisfying life.

It can't lead us to the kind of fullness and happiness that we all long for. It can't satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart alone. It will lead us down an ever-increasing path of despair of how little we can actually know and how terribly sad the world is.

And so this raises some questions for us. It raises questions like this. Is there another way to pursue wisdom and knowledge in a way that doesn't end in such futility?

Is there a way that can actually lead us to experience the fullness of what it means to be human? If what Solomon concludes is true, how should we think about and pursue the life of the mind, especially if we're followers of Jesus?

Does this mean that knowledge is not worth pursuing at all? Does this lead us to a place of anti-intellectualism? Or is there a way for followers of Jesus to pursue the intellectual life in a way that leads us away from futility and towards fullness?

[15:48] Away from futility and towards fullness. And that's what I want to look at secondly. We're going to look at the fullness of knowledge. The fullness of knowledge. If you study Ecclesiastes, part of what you learn right away is that part of the key to understanding this book is this phrase, under the sun.

Under the sun or under heaven. It's the most repeated phrase throughout the whole book. It's even repeated twice here in our short passage. And this phrase helps us to understand what Solomon is saying.

He's saying if you look at life just by itself, if you look at life just as it appears to be under the sun, if you study it, if you observe it, if you experience it, it eventually is going to lead you to a place of despair.

But this should lead us to ask us, this should lead us to ask an important question. And the important question is this. What if? What if everything under the sun isn't all there is?

What if there's more than just the material world that we can hear and taste and see and touch? Ecclesiastes should lead us to ask the question, what if there is fullness to be found beyond the sun?

[17:03] Every other religion and philosophy in this world teaches that true knowledge and true wisdom is out there somewhere and it's up to us to go and pursue and find it. But Christianity tells us something radically different.

That true wisdom and true knowledge isn't just out there, that it has come to find us. And John chapter one, verse one says, in the beginning was the word, the logos.

And the logos was with God and the logos was God. In the ancient world, the logos was the great pursuit of all of the philosophers in the known world. It was the one unifying source of all wisdom and knowledge that would explain everything else in the universe.

And John is telling us in John chapter one that the logos, the true wisdom beyond the sun, isn't just an abstract idea out there. It's a person. It's a person.

The apostle Paul says the same thing, a similar thing in Colossians two, verse three, he says, all of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ.

[18:12] All of the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ. To know Jesus is to know not only the source of all wisdom, but wisdom itself. He is the one who made all things, sustains all things, knows all things.

And he is the one who became wisdom incarnate, knowledge in the flesh. And it's in knowing Jesus as the logos, it's in knowing Jesus as our divine wisdom that takes the futility of the intellectual life that Solomon describes, that takes us away from that and towards the fullness that is found in Christ.

And so I want to suggest three ways. I want to suggest three ways that knowing Jesus as the logos, as the divine wisdom, transforms our pursuit of knowledge and the intellectual life.

Three ways that knowing Jesus as the logos transforms our pursuit of knowledge and the intellectual life. First of all, knowing Jesus as the logos means that everything is worth knowing. Knowing Jesus as the logos means that everything is worth knowing. Everybody has a starting place for their epistemology, for how they know what they know. Whether you're an atheist or

agnostic, whether you're religious, nobody knows anything about the world in a vacuum.

[19 : 35] What it means for Jesus to be our starting point, what it means for him to be our foundation, is that then we know that we know that everything matters. Colossians chapter one says it like this, that all things, all things have been made by Jesus and for Jesus.

That includes everything in the world. We have been made in his image to know him and to know about the world that he's made. And so when we study math or science or literature or biology or engineering or art, we are not just pursuing knowledge under the sun.

We're not just pursuing knowledge for its own sake. We are pursuing knowledge and learning about the world so to better understand God and to commune with him. Every Sunday, we read the great commandment.

We're to love the Lord our God with all of our heart and with all our soul and with all of our mind.

This is what it means to love God with all of our minds. If Jesus is our starting point for knowledge, then we should care about the life of the mind and intellectual pursuits because we should expect, we should expect to find truth and goodness and beauty wherever it is to be found.

The fact that Jesus is the Logos isn't the end of the intellectual life. It is only the beginning. It's the foundation for knowing and pursuing truth.

[20 : 54] So that's the first thing. Knowing Jesus as the Logos means everything matters.

Everything's worth knowing. Secondly, knowing Jesus as the Logos frees us to say, I don't know.

It frees us to say, I don't know. Solomon says there's this deep futility in knowledge that the more we know, the more we realize how much we don't know. And for some of us, this is an incredible burden.

In some of our workplaces, our classrooms, among your peers, some of us may feel the very visceral pressure to have all the answers, to be the smartest person in the room.

But if you feel the pressure to be the smartest person in the room, chances are you have made your intellect your identity. And if your intellect is your identity, then you're not free to admit what you don't know.

Because not knowing something crushes you. David Foster Wallace, in his famous graduation speech at Kenyon College, called *This Is Water*, puts it beautifully like this.

[21 : 59] He says, if you worship your intellect, if you worship being seen as smart, you will always end up feeling stupid, a fraud, on the verge of being found out.

But if Jesus Christ has become your wisdom, if he has become your starting place for knowledge, then your intellect is no longer where you get your sense of identity and self-worth. Because there is only one, there is only one who is wise enough to know all things, and it's not you.

And it's not me. If Jesus Christ is the Logos, that means that Christians should be too radically things at once. On one hand, they should be deeply intellectual. And at the same time, they should be radically free and comfortable to acknowledge what they don't know.

and to be open to learning from anybody and anyone who is pursuing goodness and truth and beauty. Thirdly, finally, knowing Jesus as the Logos frees us to hope when knowing makes us hurt.

Knowing Jesus as the Logos frees us to hope when knowing makes us hurt. If it's true what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 1, that the more wisdom, the more sorrow.

[23 : 23] And the more knowledge, the more grief. That's true. And it's also true that Jesus Christ was the most sorrowful person who ever lived.

Because he is the eternal Logos. He is the eternal wisdom made flesh. And in him, we see someone, we see what wisdom looks like.

It's someone who takes on flesh to suffer and die for the sake of the world and to raise it up again by his resurrection power. And this is what has the power to transform the kind of despair and futility that we see all over Ecclesiastes.

This futility that the more that we know, the more sorrowful we become. I just want to speak for a moment to all of the kids and youth in the room. If you're in school, elementary school, middle school, high school, college, the more time that you spend as a student, the more time you spend in school, the more you learn, the more you're going to learn about hard things.

You're going to learn more examples like the story of Emmett Till. Things that make us sad, things that make us angry, things that make us grieve. Perhaps you can already think of things that you learned in school that have made you grieve or sad or angry.

[24 : 43] But the incredibly good news, if Jesus is our starting place for knowledge, if he's our Logos, then all of those things that we learn about in school that make us sad, whether it's poverty or injustice or wars or hatred or violence, we can learn about those things from the perspective and knowing that one day Jesus is going to renew and restore all of those things.

that even as we study the sorrows of this world, we don't study them in despair, we study them in hope that the eternal Logos makes all things new.

not surprisingly, C.S. Lewis said this a lot more eloquently than me many years ago in an essay that was originally a sermon called Learning in Wartime where he's speaking to students at Oxford and he's answering very similar questions that are being raised in Ecclesiastes.

And he was writing during the 1940s in his day. People were calling into question the value of a college education while World War II was raging on around the world.

And people were asking questions like this, why study literature and philosophy and science when the whole world is in a crisis, when the whole world is in the middle of a global war. And Lewis says this in his essay, he says it's actually a crisis like a global war that reminds us of what pursuing knowledge is really about.

[26 : 10] That it's not just pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge, it's about pursuing knowledge for the glory of God. That the intellectual life if humbly offered to God can be a means of pursuing truth and goodness and beauty in a way that offers real meaning and hope.

to a world that is hurting and broken. And here's how he ends his sermon. He says, if we had un-foolish, or sorry, if we had foolish, un-Christian hopes about human culture before the war, they are now shattered.

If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city, satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned and not a moment too soon.

But, if we thought that for some souls and at some times, the life of learning humbly offered to God was, was in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the divine reality and the divine beauty, which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still.

And friends, that is what it means to have Jesus as our logos, as our wisdom and our knowledge. As Solomon reminds us, pursuing knowledge for its own sake, it's going to lead you into incredible futility and despair.

[27 : 54] But to pursue the intellectual life as a Christian is one of the greatest exercises in hope. In the hope that Jesus Christ, the eternal logos, makes all things new.

Pray with me. Father in heaven, we thank you that in you we see eternal wisdom and knowledge. In you is ultimate truth and goodness and beauty.

Lord, I pray for all of us as we give ourselves to the life of the mind, to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom in this world. Even as it makes us sad, even as it shows us how much we don't know.

Lord, I pray that you would help us to understand Jesus that you make all things new and therefore that everything matters and that we can give ourselves, we can give our minds to you, we can love you with all of our minds and that we can offer this as a humble sacrifice to you and offer truth and meaning and hope to the world.

We pray all this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.