

STUDY 5 || ECCLESIASTES 6-8

EVEN THE EXPERTS CAN'T SOLVE LIFE

As an advanced society of well-educated Australians, we tend to think we've got life pretty well sorted out. In Ecclesiastes we've met a Teacher who's trying a very similar approach to looking at life, to see how far it can take him. He's exploring human life from the perspective of a highly intelligent, highly educated person carefully observing reality, a kind of wisdom that takes humanity as the starting point rather than God (contrast e.g. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge" Proverbs 1:7). Now the time has come for the Teacher to wrestle with the question: Where does this human-powered wisdom actually get you in the end?

Think of a decision where you relied on the advice of an expert. Maybe a medical, legal, career or study decision. Maybe about home renovation or car maintenance. Who did you go to for advice? Are you glad you did?

ANCIENT WISDOM

Read Ecclesiastes 6.

1. Drawing on your memory of previous weeks, what observations and ideas does the Teacher repeat here from earlier chapters?

2. What key questions does this raise in verses 8, 11 & 12? Why would that be?

To hear how the Teacher begins to answer these questions, read Ecclesiastes 7.

In the first half of the chapter, it seems the Teacher isn't quite ready to give up on human wisdom...

3. What's the main benefit of wisdom in verses 1-12?

Then in the second half of the chapter he sees the other side of the argument...

4. What's the fatal weakness of human wisdom in verses 13, 14, 20 & 27-29?

5. In light of this unavoidable weakness, what's the Teacher's shocking advice in verses 15-18? Can you make any sense of this advice in light of what else he's said?

In chapter 8, the Teacher continues to wrestle back and forth with himself about the value of human wisdom and right conduct. It helps people live better and longer (v1-6). But it doesn't take away death or help you see beyond death (v7-8). But foolishness can bring self-harm here and now (v9). But in the end - in death - it seems that wicked fools end up no worse off than the wise and righteous (v10). But at least the wise and righteous will live longer than wicked fools (v11-13)... except of course when they don't! In this life, often the wicked get what the righteous deserve and the righteous get what the wicked deserve! (v14) So where does that leave the value of human wisdom and right conduct?

Read the Teacher's conclusions in Ecclesiastes 8:15-17.

6. In verses 16-18, what's the Teacher's final advice on how much to value human *wisdom*? Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

7. In verse 5, what does he say you should value more than human wisdom? Why would that be?

GOSPEL WISDOM

The Teacher has now taken human-powered wisdom to its limits, and he's found those limits are pretty severe! It won't stop sin wrecking your life, or death ending it. It's powerless for that! At its absolute best, human-powered wisdom can point us back to our utter dependence on God.

Fortunately, that's not a bad place to find yourself. In fact, in light of Jesus, knowing you're completely dependent on God's wisdom - not human wisdom - is exactly where you want to be...

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." ²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Read together 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

8. Think of some experts you rely on in your life, like scientists, doctors, psychologists, lawyers, political commentators. How far does their expertise go in solving the problem of sin and death?

9. In the gospel, how is "the foolishness of God wiser than human wisdom"? (verses 18 & 21)

10. Does that mean human expertise is all worthless? In light of Ecclesiastes 6-8 and the gospel, what would be a balanced attitude to human wisdom, intelligence and education?

As an advanced society of well-educated Australians, we *do* tend to think we've got life pretty well sorted out among ourselves. Fortunately, Ecclesiastes applies this approach more thoroughly and consistently than we tend to... and shows us that it's literally a dead end! The good news - the gospel - is that the very problems which human wisdom can never solve - sin and death - are exactly the problems Jesus solved in his crucifixion and resurrection. Praise God for his wisdom in Jesus and pray for each other that you really will value God's wisdom in Jesus far more than your own wisdom... or anyone else's.