

Ecclesiastes 2:12-17

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/eccl/eccl-2/ecclesiastes-212-17/>

Solomon expresses his displeasure with how Time obscures the value of reason and experience. When it comes to relieving mankind's compulsion to understand, wisdom is as vaporous as madness and folly.

Solomon has now *turned* to a new direction. Whereas he had been considering the value of pleasure, he turns to *consider wisdom, madness, and folly*. Solomon can make such a consideration because no *man* who will come *after the king* will do anything *except what has already been done*.

There will be no new inventions, no new developments that will overthrow his evaluation of *wisdom, madness and folly* because *there is nothing new under the sun*. There is no sense here that "later generations will figure it out." The clear sense is "every generation will have the same basic experience." They won't "figure it out."

Solomon states that *wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness*. Living in wisdom is vastly superior to living foolishly. *Wisdom* is to making life choices what *light* is to finding a path to navigate. Just as *light excels darkness* because we can see to walk or work, *wisdom excels folly* because the wise man can see more with the eyes of understanding. More truth is observable, while the *fool walks in the darkness*. It seems here that Solomon is speaking of personal benefit. Just as he enjoyed his *labors* while completing his building projects. *Wisdom* is more valuable than *folly*.

Solomon again turns to the broader perspective. *Wisdom excels folly*, yet, *one fate befalls them both*. Time, again, is the great equalizer. In this case, leveling both wise and foolish to zero; both will die and be largely or completely forgotten. Solomon personalizes this by lamenting that *the fate of the fool will befall him*. *Why then* is *wisdom* valuable if it does not alter the fate he must share with the fool?

This too is *vanity* because there is no *lasting remembrance* in either the wise or the foolish. It could be considered ironic here that we are commenting on Solomon's writings some three thousand years later, contemplating his words asserting there is no *lasting remembrance*. But if you visit Israel, anything that Solomon built is gone or in ruin. The hill upon which he settled his wives is still

called the “Hill of Scandal” because of the foreign wives who sacrificed to foreign gods. It is arguable that he is as remembered for his later foolishness as much as for his early wisdom. We read and discuss Solomon’s writings, but it is a minuscule speck of who he was and what he did.

Wisdom is more valuable than *folly* because it brings us an understanding that helps us live as those who see, rather than living blindly. But wisdom never brings ultimate understanding. The wise and foolish perish alike.

What seems more valuable today *will be forgotten* alongside the less valuable things. So, just as a vapor appears solid but disappears when we try to grasp it, so does the nature of wisdom dissipate over time. The advantage of wisdom equalizes over time and so its ultimate value is (in one way) the same as folly—incomplete. It does not answer the compulsion to understand. Worse, it might actually stir the compulsion to know the way, when the way cannot be known. This becomes a *striving after the wind*. When it comes to gaining understanding (of ultimate meaning and purpose) through reason and experience, Solomon declares it to be vaporous, *vanity*, ungraspable.

As a result of this consideration, Solomon says that he *hated life* because *the work which had been done under the sun was grievous* to him. Even though he recognized that his *wisdom* made life much better than living like a *fool* it is all *grievous* (or evil: see our commentary on [Ecclesiastes 1:12-15](#)).

The cause of this feeling of grievousness is *futility* (hebel: see our commentary on [Ecclesiastes 1:2](#)) and *striving after the wind*. Ra’uwth, the word for *striving*, has a connotation of longing. Yearning to catch the wind is futile. So is seeking to discover meaning and purpose through reason and experience.

Biblical Text:

¹² **So I turned to consider wisdom, madness and folly; for what *will* the man *do* who will come after the king *except* what has already been done?** ¹³ **And I saw that wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.** ¹⁴ **The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. And yet I know that one fate befalls them both.** ¹⁵ **Then I said to myself, “As is the fate of the fool, it will also befall me. Why then have I been extremely wise?”** So I said to myself, “This too is vanity.” ¹⁶ **For there is no lasting remembrance of the wise man as with the fool, inasmuch as *in* the coming days all will be forgotten. And how the wise man and the fool alike die!** ¹⁷ **So I hated life, for the work which had been**

done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind.