

Ecclesiastes 1:14

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Analysis

After surveying 'all the works that are done under the sun,' the Preacher reaches a devastating conclusion: 'all is vanity and vexation of spirit.' The phrase 'vexation of spirit' translates the Hebrew 're'ut ruach' (רֵעֵת רַעַח), literally 'shepherding' or 'striving after wind'—a vivid metaphor for futile effort expended on something impossible to grasp or control. This isn't mere pessimism but empirical observation based on comprehensive investigation. The verb 'I have seen' (ra'iti, רָאָיתִי) emphasizes personal, firsthand examination—Solomon didn't theorize abstractly but tested life's meaning through direct experience. The verse teaches that human activity disconnected from God's purposes, no matter how impressive or ambitious, ultimately proves empty. This prepares readers for the book's later affirmations: lasting satisfaction comes not from accomplishments 'under the sun' but from fearing God and receiving His gifts with gratitude.

Historical Context

Solomon's vast accomplishments—building projects, international trade, wisdom writings, scientific investigations (1 Kings 4:29-34, 10:14-29)—gave him unique authority to pronounce on life's meaning after 'seeing' everything empirically possible. His encyclopedic knowledge of plants, animals, and natural phenomena represented ancient science's pinnacle. Yet comprehensive investigation revealed a troubling pattern: every achievement, once attained, lost its luster and failed to satisfy. The phrase 'under the sun' occurs 29 times in Ecclesiastes, denoting the horizontal, earthbound perspective lacking divine revelation. This contrasts with

later biblical revelation 'from above' (James 3:17) that provides meaning transcending temporal existence. Paul later echoed this when he counted all earthly achievements as 'loss' compared to knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7-8), demonstrating continuity between Ecclesiastes' Old Covenant realism and New Covenant revelation.

Related Passages

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. What works or accomplishments have you pursued that, once achieved, left you feeling empty rather than fulfilled?
2. How does this verse challenge modern culture's promise that success, achievement, or self-actualization will bring lasting satisfaction?

Interlinear Text

I have seen	H853	H3605	all the works	H4639	that are done	H6213	under the sun	H8478	H8121
H7200									

הִנֵּה לְכֶם הַבְּשָׂר וְרַע וְתַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶן	H2009	H3605	and behold all is vanity	H1892	and vexation	H7469	of spirit	H7307
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Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (Spirit): Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:17 (Spirit): Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 2:26 (Spirit): For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 6:9 (Spirit): Better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire: this is also vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 (Spirit): Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.

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