

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' (רְעוּת רוּחַ), 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' (רָאִיתִי, ra'iti) 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

הִשָּׁמָשׁ מִשׁ	תַּחַת	שְׁנֵעָשׂ וְ	הַמַּעֲשִׂים	כָּל	אֶת	רָא יָדִי
I have seen	H8478	that are done	all the works	H3605	H853	H7200
		H6213	H4639			
רוּחַ:	וְרָע וְ	הֵ בָּל	הֵכֵל ל	וְהִנֵּה ה		
of spirit	and vexation	and behold all is vanity				
H7307	H7469	H1892	H3605	H2009		

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.