

Ecclesiastes 1:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

That which is crooked cannot be made straight: and that which is wanting cannot be numbered.

Analysis

This verse captures the sobering reality of humanity's limitations and the fallen world's brokenness. The Hebrew word for 'crooked' (me'uwvath, מְעוּבָת) describes something twisted, perverted, or distorted—morally and physically. The parallel term 'wanting' (chesrown, חֵשְׁוֹן) means deficiency or lack. Together, these terms paint a picture of irreversible damage and insurmountable deficiency. The Preacher (Qoheleth) uses this observation to highlight a fundamental limitation of human wisdom and effort. No amount of human ingenuity can reverse certain consequences of the fall or fill certain voids in the created order. This verse echoes Job 12:14 ('what he teareth down cannot be built again') and anticipates Paul's teaching on creation's bondage to corruption (Romans 8:20-21). Theologically, this verse points to humanity's need for divine intervention. While human wisdom reaches its limit at the crooked and the wanting, God's redemptive power can make 'crooked places straight' (Isaiah 40:4; 45:2) and supply what is lacking. This verse thus functions as wisdom literature's acknowledgment of both human limitation and the necessity of God's restorative grace. The Christian reader finds hope in Christ, who came to heal the broken and fill what is empty (Luke 4:18; Ephesians 1:23).

Historical Context

Ecclesiastes was likely written during Solomon's reign (circa 970-930 BCE) or shortly thereafter, though some scholars date it to the post-exilic period (5th-3rd century BCE). The book addresses the perennial human quest for meaning 'under

the sun'—a phrase occurring 29 times, denoting earthly existence apart from eternal perspective. The Preacher's observations about crooked things and deficiencies would have resonated with ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, which often acknowledged life's limitations and mysteries. However, unlike pessimistic Mesopotamian texts like the 'Dialogue of Pessimism,' Ecclesiastes maintains faith in God's sovereignty while honestly confronting life's frustrations. For Israel, this verse provided realistic wisdom for navigating a fallen world. Whether facing the permanent consequences of sin, the limitations of human justice, or the irreversible march of time, God's people needed wisdom that acknowledged reality without losing hope. The verse teaches that true wisdom recognizes both human limitations and divine sovereignty—a balance essential for covenant faithfulness in every generation.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What areas of brokenness in your life or the world around you feel permanently 'crooked' or 'wanting,' and how does this verse reshape your expectations?
2. How does recognizing human limitation in fixing what is broken drive you toward greater dependence on God's redemptive power?
3. In what ways does this verse challenge modern assumptions about human progress, self-improvement, or the ability to fix all problems through effort?
4. How does the gospel message transform the pessimism this verse might otherwise produce into realistic hope?
5. What specific 'crooked' situations in your relationships, work, or spiritual life require you to accept limitations while trusting God's ultimate restoration?

Interlinear Text

מַעַן תְּ	לֹא	יָכוֹל	לְתַחַת	וְ	לִפְנֵי
That which is crooked	cannot	be made straight		and that which is wanting	
H5791	H3808	H3201	H8626		H2642
לֹא	לְהַמְנִזּוֹת:	יָכוֹל			
H3808	cannot	be numbered			
H3201		H4487			

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 40:4 (Creation): Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:

Ecclesiastes 3:14 (Parallel theme): I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

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