

Ecclesiastes 1:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

Analysis

This verse poses the book's central question: 'What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?' The Hebrew 'yitron' (יֵתְרוֹן, profit/advantage/gain) appears nine times in Ecclesiastes, asking whether human toil produces lasting surplus or benefit. The phrase 'under the sun' (tachat hashemesh, תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ) occurs 29 times, denoting earthly existence evaluated apart from divine revelation or eternal perspective. Solomon isn't questioning whether labor has immediate returns (it obviously does) but whether it yields permanent advantage that transcends death and time. From a purely horizontal, earthbound viewpoint, all labor's fruits prove temporary—possessions left to others, accomplishments forgotten, even wisdom's advantages nullified by death (2:14-16). This sobering question drives readers toward the book's conclusion: true and lasting profit comes not from labor itself but from receiving labor's fruits as God's gifts, enjoyed within covenant obedience (2:24-26; 3:12-13; 12:13).

Historical Context

Ancient Israelite culture was predominantly agricultural and mercantile—survival depended on productive labor. The question 'what profit?' would have resonated deeply with people whose daily toil determined whether families ate or starved. Yet Solomon, with access to unlimited resources and servants (2:7), still posed this question, indicating that abundant production doesn't solve the profit problem. The verse anticipates Jesus's similar question: 'What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?' (Mark 8:36). Paul later contrasted

earthly labor with eternal reward: 'bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things' (1 Timothy 4:8). The Protestant work ethic, rooted in Calvin and Puritan theology, engaged this question by viewing earthly labor as vocation from God, valuable not for intrinsic profit but as faithful stewardship that glorifies God.

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. What lasting profit do you hope to gain from your current work and labor, and how does viewing it from eternity's perspective change your expectations?
2. How can labor have meaning and value even when it produces no permanent earthly profit?

Interlinear Text

מָה	יִתֵּר וֶן	לְאָדָם	בְּכָל	עֲמָל וֹ	שִׁיעָמָה לִּ	תַּחַת
H4100	What profit	hath a man	H3605	of all his labour	which he taketh	H8478
	H3504	H120		H5999	H5998	

הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:
under the sun
H8121

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 3:9 (Parallel theme): What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?

Ecclesiastes 5:16 (Parallel theme): And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?

Ecclesiastes 2:22 (Parallel theme): For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (Parallel theme): 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.

John 6:27 (Parallel theme): Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed.

Isaiah 55:2 (Parallel theme): Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

Ecclesiastes 2:19 (Parallel theme): And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity.

Matthew 16:26 (Parallel theme): For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?