

Ecclesiastes 1:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

One generation passeth away, and another generation
cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.

Analysis

The Preacher observes the cyclical nature of human existence: 'One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever.' The Hebrew 'dor' (דור, generation) refers to each successive cohort of humanity, while 'olam' (עולם, for ever) indicates indefinite continuation. Human beings are temporary—each generation rises, lives briefly, and passes away—yet the earth endures beyond individual lives. This verse establishes a fundamental tension: human mortality versus creation's relative permanence. The observation isn't nihilistic despair but sober realism. Individual significance appears minimal when viewed against earth's enduring existence. The verse prepares readers for the question: if generations come and go while the earth remains, what lasting meaning can human life possess? Only relationship with the eternal God, not earthly permanence, provides enduring significance. The contrast anticipates Jesus's teaching: 'Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away' (Mark 13:31)—even earth's relative permanence is temporary compared to God's eternal Word.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature often reflected on human mortality and the cosmos's durability. Egyptian tomb inscriptions lamented that the dead are forgotten while the Nile continues flowing. Mesopotamian epics portrayed human transience against the gods' immortality. However, Ecclesiastes uniquely roots this observation in covenant theology: the earth endures because God sustains it

(Psalm 104:5), and human significance derives from the Creator, not from personal permanence. Solomon wrote during Israel's monarchy when dynastic succession made generational succession vivid—kings rose and fell, yet Israel's land endured (at least until exile). The post-exilic community, having experienced displacement, found poignancy in this verse: even when Israel lost the land, the earth remained. New Testament writers developed this theme: earth's apparent permanence is temporary—'the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up' (2 Peter 3:10). Only God and His word endure eternally. The Reformers emphasized that believers find permanence not in earthly duration but in union with the eternal Christ.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing your generation's temporary existence while creation endures affect your perspective on legacy, achievement, and lasting significance?
2. What pursuits in your life attempt to achieve earthly permanence, and how does this verse challenge those attempts?

Interlinear Text

יְדֹוֹר	הִלָּךְ	יְדֹוֹר	בָּ אֵל	וְהָאֵרֶץ	לְעוֹלָם
One generation	passeth away	One generation	cometh	but the earth	for ever
H1755	H1980	H1755	H935	H776	H5769
עֲמִידָתָא:					
abideth					
H5975					

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 104:5 (Parallel theme): Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be removed for ever.

Ecclesiastes 6:12 (Parallel theme): For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

Zechariah 1:5 (Parallel theme): Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?

Matthew 24:35 (Parallel theme): Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.