

Ecclesiastes 2:19

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? Solomon confronts the ultimate futility of earthly labor: he cannot control whether his successor will be wise or foolish, yet this unknown heir **shall have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured** (יִשְׁלַט בְּכֹל-אֲמָלִי, yishlat b'chol-amali). The verb 'shalat' (יִשְׁלַט) means to have dominion or exercise power—someone else will control what Solomon built through wisdom and toil. This is **vanity** (הֶבֶל, hevel)—vapor, breath, emptiness.

The tragedy intensifies because Solomon likely wrote this reflecting on his son Rehoboam, whose foolishness would split the kingdom (1 Kings 12). All Solomon's wisdom in building Israel's empire would be undone by one fool's arrogance. This verse exposes the illusion of legacy-building: you cannot guarantee that your life's work will be stewarded well. Only treasures laid up in heaven—works done for God's glory—transcend the uncertainty of human succession. Jesus warned against earthly treasure precisely because it can be inherited by fools (Luke 12:20).

Historical Context

Solomon ruled Israel at its apex (970-930 BC), building the Temple, expanding trade routes, and establishing unprecedented prosperity. Yet his son Rehoboam's

refusal to lighten taxation sparked the northern tribes' rebellion (1 Kings 12:1-19), dividing the kingdom permanently. This historical fulfillment gives Ecclesiastes 2:19 prophetic poignancy—Solomon's fear proved justified. Ancient Near Eastern monarchs obsessed over succession, building monuments and establishing dynasties to ensure their legacy. But Ecclesiastes recognizes what pagan wisdom missed: human mortality means you cannot control what happens after you die. The wise king's labor can be destroyed by the foolish heir's incompetence.

Related Passages

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What life's work or legacy are you building that could be undone by those who come after you, and how does this reality reshape your priorities?
2. How does surrendering control of future outcomes to God's sovereignty free you from the anxiety of legacy-building?

Interlinear Text

וְנִי י	יֹדֵעַ	הֲיָחֵזֵם	אִם יִהְיֶה	סָכָל	
H4310	And who knoweth	whether he shall be a wise	H1961	H176	man or a fool
	H3045	H2450			H5530
וְיִשְׁלֹט	בְּכָל	עֲמָלִי	שָׁעַמְ לִי		
yet shall he have rule	H3605	over all my labour	wherein I have laboured		
H7980		H5999	H5998		
וְשָׁחֵז מְתִי	תַּחַת	הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ	גַּם	זֶה	
and wherein I have shewed myself wise	H8478	under the sun	H1571	H2088	
H2449		H8121			
הַכָּל:					
This is also vanity					
H1892					

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 3:22 (Parallel theme): Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

James 3:17 (Parallel theme): But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.