

Ecclesiastes 2:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun.

Analysis

Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair (וַיַּסְבֹּתִי אֲנִי לְיַאֲשׁ אֶת-לְבִי) —the Hebrew verb 'ya'ash' (יאשׁ) means to despair, lose hope, or give up. This isn't passive melancholy but active, deliberate despair—Solomon intentionally let his heart confront the futility he'd been avoiding. The phrase 'went about' (saboti) suggests a turning, a change of perspective. After pursuing labor's meaning through achievement, Solomon turned to examine it from the opposite angle: accepting its ultimate meaninglessness 'under the sun.'

This verse models brutal honesty before God. Rather than maintaining false optimism or denying reality, Solomon allowed himself to feel the full weight of **all the labour which I took under the sun**. This despair isn't the end of wisdom but the necessary path through which God brings us to see that meaning comes not from our labor itself but from receiving God's gifts with gratitude (2:24-26). Paul later echoed this pattern: 'we despaired even of life' led him to trust 'God which raiseth the dead' (2 Corinthians 1:8-9).

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature typically promoted labor as inherently meaningful—Egyptian instructions and Mesopotamian proverbs promised that diligent work produces prosperity and honor. Ecclesiastes breaks this paradigm by acknowledging that labor 'under the sun' (evaluated apart from God) ultimately proves empty. For Israel's post-exilic community, struggling to rebuild after

Babylonian destruction, this verse validated their feelings of futility—rebuilding what had been destroyed can feel pointless. Yet the book's conclusion (12:13-14) redirects: labor gains meaning not from its earthly results but from obedience to God, who will judge all works justly.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What labor or achievement in your life have you been avoiding honest evaluation of, fearing the despair that might result?
2. How can allowing yourself to feel the futility of earthly labor (when pursued as an end in itself) actually lead you toward true meaning in God?

Interlinear Text

כִּל עַל לִבִּי אַת לִיא שׁ אָנִי יִסְבֶּה וְתִי

Therefore I went about H5437 **to cause** H589 **my heart** H3820 **under the sun** H3605

הַשְׁמַשׁ: תַּחַת שְׁעַם לְתִי בְּעַמְלֵל

of all the labour H5999 **which I took** H5998 **under the sun** H8121