

Ecclesiastes 2:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil.

Analysis

For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity (בְּחִכְמָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכִשְׁרוֹן, b'chochma uv'da'at uv'kishron)—the threefold description emphasizes comprehensive excellence. 'Chochma' (חִכְמָה) is wisdom, 'da'at' (דַּעַת) is knowledge, and 'kishron' (כִּשְׁרוֹן) means skill or equity. This worker did everything right—applied wisdom, accumulated knowledge, and demonstrated skillful execution. Yet the devastating reality follows: **to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion.**

The Hebrew 'chelko' (חֵלְקוֹ, his portion) refers to an inheritance or allotted share—the lazy heir receives what the diligent worker earned. This is not merely **vanity** (הֶבֶל, hevel) but **a great evil** (רָעָה רַבָּה, ra'ah rabbah)—an intensified moral outrage. The wise worker's labor enriches someone who contributed nothing, violating justice and mocking merit. This verse shatters meritocracy's illusion: earthly reward doesn't correlate perfectly with effort or virtue. Only God's final judgment will rectify this inequity (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

Historical Context

In ancient agrarian societies, inheritance laws determined economic stability. Israelite law mandated primogeniture with the eldest son receiving a double

portion (Deuteronomy 21:17), regardless of his merit or father's preference. Solomon witnessed this pattern: worthy younger sons sometimes lost inheritance to unworthy elder brothers. The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) later illustrated this dynamic—the wasteful son received his portion while the faithful son continued working. Ecclesiastes challenges the prosperity gospel's ancient equivalent: the assumption that diligent work guarantees proportional reward. Reformed theology emphasizes that earthly distribution of rewards is not perfectly just—only at the final judgment will works receive appropriate recompense.

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. When have you labored skillfully only to see others benefit who didn't contribute to the work, and how did you process that injustice?
2. How does trusting God's final judgment free you to work with excellence even when earthly rewards seem unfairly distributed?

Interlinear Text

וּבִדְעַת בְּחָכְמָהּ הַשְׁעֵמֶל וְיֵאֱמָר שׁוֹכֵן
H3588 **For there is** **a man** **whose labour** **is in wisdom** **and in knowledge**
H3426 H120 H5999 H2451 H1847

בֹּיָעַל עֲמֵל שֶׁל אִישׁ וְיֵאֱמָר וּבְכֶשֶׁר וְנִי
and in equity **a man** **that hath not laboured** **and in equity**
H3788 H120 H3808 H5998 H0

וְיָרֶעַ הַזֶּה גַּם חֵלֶק וְיִתֵּן נָוֶה
therein shall he leave **it for his portion** **This also is vanity** **evil**
H5414 H2506 H1571 H2088 H1892 H7451

וְגָדָה:
and a great
H7227