

Ecclesiastes 2:22

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun?

Analysis

For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? This rhetorical question expects the answer: nothing lasting. The phrase **vexation of his heart** translates 'ra'yon libo' (רַעְיוֹן לִבּוֹ)—the mental anguish, anxiety, and striving that accompanies labor. It's not merely physical toil but the psychological burden: planning, worrying, strategizing, competing. The question asks what permanent profit (yitron, יִתְרוֹן) remains after expending both physical energy and mental stress.

From a purely horizontal perspective 'under the sun' (תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ, tachat hashemesh), the answer is devastating: nothing endures. Possessions pass to others (v. 21), achievements are forgotten (1:11), and death equalizes the wise and the fool (2:14-16). The verse forces confrontation with mortality's implications. Yet this isn't nihilism but preparation for the gospel: lasting value comes not from labor's earthly results but from working 'as to the Lord' (Colossians 3:23), storing treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20), and receiving present enjoyment as God's gift (Ecclesiastes 2:24-26).

Historical Context

Ancient labor was often brutal—agricultural work under the sun's heat, building projects requiring enormous physical effort, trade requiring dangerous travel. The 'vexation of heart' included anxiety about weather, crop failure, theft, war, and economic instability. Unlike modern social safety nets, ancient workers had no

retirement plans, unemployment insurance, or healthcare. A single disaster could destroy a lifetime's accumulation. For Israel, the question resonated especially after the Babylonian exile destroyed generations of accumulated wealth and labor. The New Testament affirms that earthly labor's value is provisional (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)—the world's present form is passing away.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What mental and emotional vexation accompanies your work, and how much of this anxiety stems from seeking ultimate meaning in labor itself?
2. How would viewing your work as service to God rather than as your source of identity or security reduce the 'vexation of heart'?

Interlinear Text

מָה כִּי H3588	הָאִישׁ H4100	לְאָדָם H120	בְּכָל H3605	עֵמָל וּ H5999	וּבְרָעִי וּ H7475
	For what hath	man		of all his labour	and of the vexation
	H1933				
לִבּוֹ H3820	שָׁהּ וּ H1931	עָמַל H6001	תַּחַת H8478	הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ: H8121	
of his heart	wherein	he hath laboured		under the sun	

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 127:2 (Parallel theme): It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

Ecclesiastes 1:3 (Parallel theme): What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?

Ecclesiastes 4:6 (Parallel theme): Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

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

Matthew 6:34 (Parallel theme): Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

1 Timothy 6:8 (Parallel theme): And having food and raiment let us be therewith content.

1 Peter 5:7 (Parallel theme): Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

Philippians 4:6 (Parallel theme): Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Ecclesiastes 8:15 (Parallel theme): Then I commended mirth, because a man hath no better thing under the sun, than to eat, and to drink, and to be merry: for that shall abide with him of his labour the days of his life, which God giveth him under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 5:17 (Parallel theme): All his days also he eateth in darkness, and he hath much sorrow and wrath with his sickness.