

Ecclesiastes 3:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth?

Analysis

What profit hath he that worketh in that wherein he laboureth? (מה-יִתְרֹן, mah-yitron ha'oresh ba'asher hu amel)—this question, following the famous 'time for everything' passage (3:1-8), applies theological pressure to the poem's meaning. If God has appointed times for every activity, and all these times cycle endlessly, what lasting advantage (yitron, יִתְרֹן!) does the worker gain? The seasons change, activities rotate, but does anything truly advance or accumulate permanent value?

The question isn't rhetorical despair but theological realism. From a purely earthly perspective, if all human activities are time-bound and cyclical—planting and uprooting, building and breaking down, laughing and mourning—then labor produces no net gain beyond the cycle itself. This drives the reader toward verses 12-14's conclusion: since we cannot change God's times or add to His perfect works, the appropriate response is receiving each season as His gift, fearing Him, and finding joy in present obedience rather than seeking permanent earthly profit.

Historical Context

Ancient agrarian life was intensely aware of seasonal cycles—planting in spring, harvesting in fall, the annual repetition of agricultural labor. Unlike modern notions of progress and accumulation, ancient farmers knew that each year's harvest must be consumed or stored, and the cycle begins again. There is no permanent agricultural surplus that transcends the seasons. Ecclesiastes 3:9

challenges ancient Israel (and modernity) to recognize that human activity operates within God's appointed times, not according to autonomous human control. The New Testament reveals that Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection occurred 'when the fullness of time was come' (Galatians 4:4)—God's perfect timing that advances redemptive history beyond mere cycles.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does recognizing that God has appointed 'times' for all your activities change your perspective on control, achievement, and profit?
2. What would it look like to work faithfully within God's times rather than anxiously striving to accumulate permanent earthly profit?

Interlinear Text

מָה	יִתְרֹן	בְּעֵשׂ	רַ	בְּאָשָׁר	הָא	עָמֵל:
H4100	What profit	hath he that worketh		in that wherein	H1931	he laboureth
	H3504			H834		H6001

Additional Cross-References

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

Ecclesiastes 5:16 (Parallel theme): And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?

Proverbs 14:23 (Parallel theme): In all labour there is profit: but the talk of the lips tendeth only to penury.

Ecclesiastes 2:11 (Parallel theme): Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

Matthew 16:26 (Parallel theme): For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

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