

Ecclesiastes 4:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Analysis

Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been—surpassing even the dead in preferability is the never-born. The logic intensifies: living sufferers endure oppression; the dead escaped it; but **who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun** avoided suffering entirely by never existing. The Hebrew *ra* (רָעַ, evil) combined with *ma'aseh* (מְעַשָּׂה, work/deed) describes actively perpetrated wickedness, not mere suffering.

This represents the Preacher's darkest moment—existence itself seems worse than non-existence when evaluated solely 'under the sun.' Yet this very extremity drives readers toward transcendent hope. The verse implicitly argues: if earthly life justifies this conclusion, meaning must lie beyond the temporal. Job voiced similar despair (3:11-16) yet ultimately encountered God (42:5). The New Testament reveals that believers' existence, though including suffering, serves eternal glory-weight (2 Corinthians 4:17) making life infinitely worthwhile.

Historical Context

Ancient Mediterranean cultures often expressed similar sentiments. Greek tragedies (Sophocles' Oedipus) concluded that not being born is best. The Greco-Roman philosopher Hegesias 'the death-persuader' argued life's misery justified suicide. However, biblical faith diverges sharply: even in darkest despair, Scripture affirms God's sovereign purposes. The difference isn't optimistic temperament but theological conviction that God works redemptively even through suffering.

Israel's exilic experience—apparent covenant failure, national destruction—could have justified non-existence preference, yet prophets promised restoration (Jeremiah 29:11). Christ's incarnation proves existence valuable: God himself became human, sanctifying human life eternally.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does this verse's radical honesty about suffering's severity prevent shallow 'think positive' responses to genuine evil?
2. What biblical truths transform existence from curse to blessing even amid severe oppression and injustice?

Interlinear Text

בַּתְּהִלָּה לֹא מְשֻׁנִּיק מִטּוֹב
Yea better is he than both H8147 H853 H834
H2896 H3808 H1961

אֲשֶׁר בָּנָע הַמְּפֻעָשׂ הָאֵת
H834 H3808 been who hath not seen H7200 H853 work H4639 the evil H7451 H834

בְּשָׁמֶן: תְּמִתָּה נִעְשֵׁה
that is done H8478 under the sun H8121

Additional Cross-References

Luke 23:29 (Parallel theme): For, behold, the days are coming, in the which they shall say, Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bare, and the paps which never gave suck.

Matthew 24:19 (Parallel theme): And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org