

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* (רָע, evil) combined with *ma'aseh* (מַעֲשֶׂה, 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

וְטוֹב	מִשְׁנֵיהֶם	אֶת	אֲשֶׁר	עַד	לֹא	הָיָה
Yea better	is he than both	H853	H834	they which hath not yet	H3808	H1961
H2896	H8147			H5728		
אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	רָאָה	אֶת	הַמַּעֲשֵׂה	הָרָע	אֲשֶׁר
H834	H3808	been who hath not seen	H853	work	the evil	H834
		H7200		H4639	H7451	
נַעֲשֶׂה	תַּחַת	הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:				
that is done	H8478	under the sun				
H6213		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!

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