

Ecclesiastes 4:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

Analysis

The Preacher offers striking wisdom: 'Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.' The Hebrew 'nachat' (נַחַת, quietness) means rest, satisfaction, contentment. One handful enjoyed with peace surpasses two handfuls gained through anxious toil and spiritual agitation. The phrase 'travail and vexation of spirit' (amal u're'ut ruach, עֲמָל וְרָעוּת רוּחַ) describes exhausting labor that disturbs the soul. This verse teaches contentment: modest provision with peace exceeds abundant wealth with anxiety. It challenges both workaholism and materialism, affirming that less with tranquility beats more with turmoil. Jesus echoed this: 'Take no thought for your life' (Matthew 6:25), and Paul learned contentment in all circumstances (Philippians 4:11-12).

Historical Context

Ancient agrarian society pressured people toward endless accumulation for security against famine, drought, and war. The temptation to maximize holdings at the cost of peace and rest was real. Yet the Preacher counsels that contentment with modest provision surpasses anxious wealth. The Sabbath commandment embodied this wisdom—ceasing labor trusts God's provision. Jesus taught similarly: life is more than possessions (Luke 12:15); Martha's anxious serving versus Mary's peaceful devotion (Luke 10:38-42). The Reformers emphasized that contentment is Christian grace, learned through faith that God provides sufficiently. Modern consumer culture particularly needs this counter-cultural wisdom.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. Are you sacrificing peace and contentment ('quietness') in pursuit of increased income and possessions ('both hands full')?
2. What would it look like practically to choose 'handful with quietness' over anxious accumulation?

Interlinear Text

ט וּב	מָלֵל א	כָּף	נְחִת	מָלֵל א	חֲפֵנֵי יָדַיִם
Better	full	is an handful	with quietness	full	than both the hands
H2896	H4393	H3709	H5183	H4393	H2651
לַעֲמָל	וְרִעַ וְתִ	רוּחַ:			
with travail	and vexation	of spirit			
H5999	H7469	H7307			

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 16:8 (Parallel theme): Better is a little with righteousness than great revenues without right.

Psalms 37:16 (Parallel theme): A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked.

Proverbs 17:1 (Parallel theme): Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife.