

Ecclesiastes 4:8

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

There is one alone, and there is not a second; yea, he hath neither child nor brother: yet is there no end of all his labour; neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good? This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail.

Analysis

There is one alone, and there is not a second—isolation defined: echad (אחד, one) with ein sheni (אין שני, no companion). **Yea, he hath neither child nor brother**—no family connections or heirs. Yet **there is no end of all his labour**—ein ketz le-khol amalo (אין קץ לכל-עמלו), endless toil accumulating wealth with no one to share or inherit it.

Neither is his eye satisfied with riches—gam-eino lo-tisba osher (עוצר), insatiable greed drives perpetual labor. The climactic question: **For whom do I labour, and bereave my soul of good?** This person never asks the obvious question until too late. Working endlessly, accumulating compulsively, denying present enjoyment, all for no one—**This is also vanity, yea, it is a sore travail** (hevel hu ve-inyan ra hu, בע הוא וענין רע הוא).

The passage diagnoses workaholism and compulsive accumulation's futility. Without relationships, even great wealth proves worthless. Jesus's parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) echoes this—the man who builds bigger barns dies that night, leaving everything to others. Paul warns against greed as idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern societies valued family continuity—sons inherited property, carried on the name, provided for parents in old age. Dying childless represented profound tragedy (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Yet some pursued wealth so obsessively that relationships withered. The isolated miser appeared in ancient literature as a cautionary figure—Egyptian instructions warned against hoarding at relationships' expense. Greco-Roman philosophy (Epicurus, Stoics) discussed the folly of accumulation without enjoyment. However, Ecclesiastes adds theological depth: humans are made for community (Genesis 2:18), and isolated accumulation violates created purpose. Monastic movements sometimes erred toward isolation, but Reformed theology emphasized vocation within community—work serves others and glorifies God.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. What pursuits are you engaging that might be 'bereaving your soul of good'—sacrificing present relationships and joy for future accumulation?
2. If you asked yourself honestly, 'For whom do I labour?'—what answer would emerge, and does it align with eternal priorities?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵין אֶחָד	שֵׁנִי	וְאֵין
There is one	alone and there is not a second	
H3426	H369	H8145
וְאֵין לֹא אָין	וְאֵין לֹא אָין	לֹא כֵן
yea he hath neither child	nor brother	yet is there no end
H1121	H251	H7093
וְאֵין עָמָל וְאֵין עָמָל	תָּשַׁבַּע לֹא	וְלֹמַד יְמִינָה עַד שֶׁר
of all his labour	neither is his eye	satisfied with riches
H5999	H5869	H7646
וְאֵין עַמְלָל לֹא וְאֵין עַמְלָל רַבָּה	וְאֵין עַמְלָל רַבָּה	מְטוּב הַנֶּפֶשִׁי אֶת my soul of good
neither saith he For whom do I labour	and bereave	
H6001	H2637	H853
וְאֵין עַמְלָל בְּלִי עַמְלָל עַמְלָל הַוְאָן כְּעַמְלָל	yea it is a sore	
This is also vanity	travail	H1931
H1892	H6045	H7451

Additional Cross-References

1 John 2:16 (Parallel theme): For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.

Proverbs 27:20 (Parallel theme): Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.

Luke 12:20 (Parallel theme): But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

Ecclesiastes 1:8 (Parallel theme): All things are full of labour; man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

Ecclesiastes 1:13 (Parallel theme): And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.

Matthew 11:28 (Parallel theme): Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Isaiah 5:8 (Parallel theme): Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!

Psalms 39:6 (Parallel theme): Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 (Parallel theme): He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity.

Genesis 2:18 (Good): And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.

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