

Ecclesiastes 5:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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?

Analysis

And this also is a sore evil (וְגַם־זֹה רַעַת חֹלֶה, vegam-zoh ra'ah cholah)—repeating verse 13's phrase, 'a grievous evil.' **That in all points as he came, so shall he go** (כֹּל־עַמֶּת שֶׁבֶת קְרַבְתָּךְ, kol-ummah shebba ken yelekh)—'exactly corresponding to how he came, thus he goes,' emphasizing precise symmetry of arrival and departure. **And what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?** (וְמַה־יִתְרֹן לְשֵׁמֶל לְרֹעַת, umah-yitron lo sheya'amol laruach)—employing yitron, the book's signature term for 'profit' or 'gain.'

The 'sore evil' is the absurdity itself: entrance equals exit, making intervening accumulation meaningless from eternity's perspective. The phrase 'laboured for the wind' (ya'amol laruach) is bitterly poetic—one cannot grasp wind, store wind, or profit from wind; it's the ultimate symbol of futility. Hosea used similar imagery: 'They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind' (Hosea 8:7). Yet Ecclesiastes' answer isn't nihilism but redirected ambition: labor for what endures. 'Do not labor for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life' (John 6:27).

Historical Context

The question 'What profit?' resonates throughout Israelite wisdom literature, constantly testing endeavors against ultimate value. This pragmatic theology insisted actions bear fruit—but fruit measured by eternal standards, not mere temporal accumulation.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What activities in your life might qualify as 'laboring for the wind'—expending energy with no eternal return?
2. How can you redirect efforts from accumulation that dies with you toward investments that follow you into eternity?
3. In what ways does recognizing life's symmetry (naked to naked) bring both humility and liberation?

Interlinear Text

וְאֵת זֶה בְּעֵת חֹלֶה כֵּל עַמְתָּה שָׁבָא כִּי
H1571 **And this** H2090 **evil** H7451 **also is a sore** H2470 H3605 **that in all points** H5980 H935 **as he came** H3651

לְרֹוחַ כִּי מִתְּהִלָּה וְלֹא שִׁימָעַת לְרֹוחַ
H1980 H4100 **and what profit** H3504 H0 **hath he that hath laboured** H5998 **for the wind** H7307

Additional Cross-References

Proverbs 11:29 (Parallel theme): He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind: and the fool shall be servant to the wise of heart.

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