

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 רָעָה חוֹלָה, vegam-zoh ra'ah cholah)—repeating verse 13's phrase, 'a grievous evil.' **That in all points as he came, so shall he go** (כָּל־עֲמַת שְׁבָא בְּן יֵלֶךְ, kol-ummat 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?** (וַיְמַה־יִתְרוֹן לוֹ, 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

Psalms 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

וְגַם	זֶה	רָעָה	חֹלָה	כָּל	עֲמִת	שָׁבָא	כִּי
H1571	And this	evil	also is a sore	H3605	that in all points	as he came	H3651
	H2090	H7451	H2470		H5980	H935	
וְיֵלֶךְ	וְיִמָּה	וְיִתֵּר וֶן	לֹא	שָׁעֵמָל	לְרוּחַ:		
H1980	H4100	and what profit	H0	hath he that hath laboured	for the wind		
		H3504		H5998	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?