

Ecclesiastes 6:12

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?

Analysis

The Preacher asks a profound question: 'For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow?' The Hebrew 'mi yodea' (מִי יְדֹא, who knows) expresses epistemic humility—human beings cannot reliably discern what truly benefits them. The phrase 'vain life' uses 'hevel' (הֶבֶל, vapor/breath), Ecclesiastes' key term for temporal existence's fleeting, insubstantial nature. Life passes quickly 'as a shadow' (katsel, קַצֵּל)—here then gone, lacking substance. The second question intensifies the first: 'who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun?' Humans cannot know the future—what will happen after their death, how their work will fare, whether their children will prosper. This double ignorance—uncertainty about present good and future outcomes—drives readers toward dependence on God's wisdom revealed in His Word.

Historical Context

Ancient wisdom literature prized knowledge of 'the good'—understanding what promotes human flourishing. Yet Ecclesiastes questions whether unaided human reason can discern this. Israel's wisdom tradition acknowledged that 'the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10)—true knowledge requires divine revelation, not autonomous reason. The shadow metaphor appears throughout Scripture (1 Chronicles 29:15; Job 8:9; Psalm 102:11; 144:4), depicting life's brevity and insubstantiality. Post-exilic readers, uncertain about their future

and questioning traditional wisdom's promises, found validation in this honest acknowledgment of human limitations. Jesus later revealed what is truly 'good': seeking first God's kingdom (Matthew 6:33), loving God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40), and storing eternal treasures (Matthew 6:19-21).

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. In what areas are you confident you know 'what is good' for your life, and how does this verse challenge that certainty?
2. How does acknowledging ignorance about the future affect your anxiety, planning, and trust in God's providence?

Interlinear Text

מִסְפֵּר	רִ	מִ	מִ	כִּי	לְאַד	מִ	טַ	וּבָ	מָה	יְדֹעַ	וְיָדֹעַ	מִ	מִ	כִּי		
H3588	H4310	For who knoweth	H4100	what is good	H2896	H120	a man	H2416	in this life	H4557	all					
		H3045		H2896		H120		H2416		H4557						
מִ	אַשְׁר	כִּי	לְ	יְמַשֵּׁךְ	מִ	חַבְלָיו	וְ	מִ	בְּ	יְמִינֵי	וְ	מִ	בְּ	יְמִינֵי		
the days	in this life	of his vain	which he spendeth	as a shadow												
H3117	H2416	H1892	H6213	H6738												
תְּ	מִתְ	אַתְּ	יְ	אַתְּ	מִ	לְאַד	מִ	הַ	הַ	מָה	לְאַד	מִ	אַתְּ	יְ	אַתְּ	
for who can tell	a man	H4100	H1961	what shall be after	H8478											
H5046	H120															
בָּשָׁמָן:																
him under the sun																
H8121																

Additional Cross-References

James 4:14 (Parallel theme): Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

Job 14:2 (Parallel theme): He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not.

Ecclesiastes 3:22 (Parallel theme): Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

Psalms 144:4 (Parallel theme): Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

Job 8:9 (Parallel theme): (For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow:)

Ecclesiastes 8:13 (Parallel theme): But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he feareth not before God.

Ecclesiastes 8:7 (Parallel theme): For he knoweth not that which shall be: for who can tell him when it shall be?

1 Chronicles 29:15 (Parallel theme): For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.

Psalms 102:11 (Parallel theme): My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.

Psalms 17:15 (Parallel theme): As for me, I will behold thy face in righteousness: I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness.