

Ecclesiastes 6:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many, and his soul be not filled with good, and also that he have no burial; I say, that an untimely birth is better than he.

Analysis

If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years—the Preacher constructs an extreme hypothetical representing maximum fertility and longevity, both considered covenant blessings (Deuteronomy 28:4, 11). **And his soul be not filled with good** (וְנַפְשׁוֹ לֹא־תִשְׂבָּע מִן־הַטּוֹבָה, ve-nafsho lo-tisba min-hatovah)—despite external blessings, inner satisfaction remains absent. **And also that he have no burial**—dying without proper burial constituted profound disgrace in ancient culture, suggesting dying unmourned or in judgment (Jeremiah 22:18-19).

The shocking conclusion: **I say, that an untimely birth is better than he** (נֶפֶל, nefel—a stillborn or miscarried child). A stillborn never experiences life's disappointments, labors without satisfaction, or accumulates blessings it cannot enjoy. This isn't recommending death over life but emphasizing how tragic existence becomes when divorced from the capacity to enjoy God's gifts. It echoes Job's lament (Job 3:11-16) and anticipates Jesus's warning about gaining the world while forfeiting the soul (Mark 8:36).

Historical Context

Ancient cultures highly valued large families and long life as signs of divine blessing. Abraham's promise included numerous descendants (Genesis 15:5), and

patriarchal narratives emphasize fertility as covenant reward. Proper burial demonstrated respect, family continuity, and hope for afterlife—Jacob insisted on burial in Canaan (Genesis 49:29-32), and Joseph's bones were carried from Egypt (Exodus 13:19). The Preacher's radical claim that a stillborn is better off than a man with maximum blessings who cannot enjoy them would have shocked ancient hearers, forcing reconsideration of what truly constitutes blessing. Post-exilic Judaism, having experienced national disaster despite covenant status, resonated with this questioning of conventional wisdom about blessing.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What does this verse teach about the difference between having God's blessings and having the capacity to enjoy them with thanksgiving?
2. How does this extreme comparison challenge cultural assumptions about success, family size, longevity, or other commonly pursued goods?

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