

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-תִשְׁבַּע 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

Psalm 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?

Interlinear Text

| | |
|--|--|
| וְיִצְחָקְהָ יְלִדְךָ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם H518 beget If a man an hundred of his years be many children and live | H3205 H376 H3967 H8141 H7227 H2421 |
| וְיִצְחָקְהָ יְלִדְךָ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם be many H1961 so that the days of his years and his soul be not filled | H7227 H3117 H8141 H5315 H3808 H7646 |
| וְיִצְחָקְהָ יְלִדְךָ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם H4480 is better H1571 and also that he have no burial | H2896 H6900 H3808 H1961 H0 |
| וְיִצְחָקְהָ יְלִדְךָ אֶת־אַבְרָהָם I say is better H4480 that an untimely birth | H559 H2896 H5309 |

Additional Cross-References

Job 3:16 (Parallel theme): Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light.

Jeremiah 22:19 (Parallel theme): He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

Ecclesiastes 4:3 (Parallel theme): Yea, better is he than both they, which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

2 Kings 9:35 (Parallel theme): And they went to bury her: but they found no more of her than the skull, and the feet, and the palms of her hands.

Genesis 47:9 (Parallel theme): And Jacob said unto Pharaoh, The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been, and have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers in the days of their pilgrimage.