

Ecclesiastes 8:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth: (for also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes:)

Analysis

When I applied mine heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done upon the earth—the Preacher describes his investigative method: wholehearted intellectual pursuit ('applied mine heart,' *natati et-libi*, נָתַתִּי אֶת־לִבִּי) combined with empirical observation ('to see the business,' *lir'ot et-ha'inyan*, לִרְאוֹת אֶת־הָעִנְיָן). This represents comprehensive investigation—both theoretical reflection and practical observation.

For also there is that neither day nor night seeth sleep with his eyes—this phrase likely describes either the Preacher's own exhaustive investigation (staying awake to observe continuously) or humanity's restless striving. The absence of sleep symbolizes relentless human activity and anxiety. Despite comprehensive investigation, verse 17 concludes that humans cannot fully comprehend God's work—even tireless effort cannot penetrate divine mysteries completely. This humbles human reason while validating honest intellectual pursuit within creaturely limitations.

Historical Context

Solomon's encyclopedic knowledge required extensive observation and study (1 Kings 4:29-34). Ancient sages pursued wisdom through disciplined investigation—Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom texts demonstrate similar comprehensive approaches. Yet Ecclesiastes uniquely acknowledges that even exhaustive study

encounters limits: God's ways transcend human comprehension (Isaiah 55:8-9). Post-exilic Judaism wrestled with mysterious providence—how could covenant-faithful people experience exile and hardship? Daniel's example shows faithful study combined with humble acknowledgment of revelation's limits (Daniel 12:8-9). Paul later taught that current knowledge remains partial: 'now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12). The Reformers emphasized Scripture's sufficiency for salvation while acknowledging God's secret counsel remains mysterious (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How do you balance vigorous intellectual pursuit with humble acknowledgment of creaturely limitations in understanding God's ways?
2. What areas of your life reflect anxious, sleepless striving rather than wise investigation combined with restful trust?

Interlinear Text

כְּאֲשֶׁר	נָתַתִּי	אֶת	לְבִי	לֵדַעַת	חֲכָמָה	רְאֵה:
H834	When I applied	H853	mine heart	to know	wisdom	and to see
	H5414		H3820	H3045	H2451	H7200
אֶת	הָעֵנִי	אֲשֶׁר	נַעֲשָׂה	עַל	הָאָרֶץ	כִּי
H853	the business	H834	that is done	H5921	upon the earth	H3588
	H6045		H6213		H776	H1571
	בַּיּוֹם		וּבַלַּיְלָה	שָׁנָה	בְּעֵינָיו	אֵין
	for also there is that neither day		nor night	sleep	with his eyes	H369
	H3117		H3915	H8142	H5869	

רְאֵה:

and to see

H7200

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 127:2 (Parallel theme): It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

Ecclesiastes 2:23 (Parallel theme): For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.

Ecclesiastes 1:13 (Parallel theme): And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.