

Ecclesiastes 9:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Analysis

This famous verse articulates one of Ecclesiastes' most profound observations about divine providence versus human merit. The fivefold negation—"the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill"—systematically dismantles meritocratic assumptions. The Hebrew construction repeats 'lo' (אַל, not) to emphasize that natural advantages don't guarantee corresponding outcomes. Speed doesn't ensure victory in races; strength doesn't guarantee triumph in battle; wisdom doesn't automatically produce sustenance; understanding doesn't inevitably yield wealth; skill doesn't necessarily result in favor. The reason: 'time and chance happeneth to them all' (et va-pega yiqreh et-kullam, עת יפְגַע יִקְרֵה אֶת-כָלָם). The phrase 'time and chance' (et va-pega) could be translated 'time and occurrence'—not randomness but unpredictable providence. God sovereignly governs outcomes in ways that transcend human ability or merit. This verse doesn't promote fatalism but humility: success depends ultimately on God, not human capability alone.

Historical Context

Solomon wrote from the perspective of someone who possessed every advantage—supreme wisdom (1 Kings 3:12), vast wealth (1 Kings 10:23), military strength (1

Kings 4:26), and royal favor. Yet he observed that such advantages don't guarantee outcomes. Ancient warfare provided stark examples: Goliath's size and strength didn't save him from David's sling (1 Samuel 17); Pharaoh's massive army couldn't prevent Israel's escape (Exodus 14). The verse resonates with Joseph's experience: skillful and wise, yet imprisoned unjustly before sudden elevation (Genesis 39-41). Jewish exile demonstrated that national strength didn't prevent conquest. The New Testament echoes this: Jesus chose weak, uneducated disciples to shame the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27); Paul's weakness displayed God's power (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Church history confirms the pattern: Christianity triumphed not through military might but through martyrs' blood. The verse teaches that God's providence, not human merit, determines outcomes—preparing readers to trust divine grace rather than personal achievement.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. What natural advantages or personal abilities are you relying on for success rather than depending humbly on God's providence?
2. How does this verse comfort you when others with seemingly superior abilities achieve outcomes you cannot, or when your own competence fails to produce expected results?

Interlinear Text

לֹא־יָמַל יְמֵי־בָּתִי
I returned and saw מִתְחַת וְרָא הַשְׁמַשׁ
H7725 H7200 H8478 H8121 H3588 H3808 H7031

לֹא־יָמַל יְמֵי־בָּתִי
that the race הַמְלַחֵם הַלְּגָבוֹר יִם וְלֹא־בַּפְּרָר וְזַיְם
H4793 H3808 H1368 H4421 H1571 H3808 H2450

לֹא־יָמַל יְמֵי־בָּתִי
neither yet bread לְגַבְנִים לֹא־יָמַל יְמֵי־בָּתִי
H1571 H3808 H995 H6239 H1571

אַתְּ יְהִי הַזְּמָן לֹא־יָמַל יְמֵי־בָּתִי
H3808 to men of skill nor yet favour H3045 H2580 H3588 but time H6256 H6294 H7136 happeneth H853

בְּלֹא־
H3605

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 9:23 (Parallel theme): Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches:

Ecclesiastes 3:17 (Parallel theme): I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.

Ecclesiastes 3:14 (Parallel theme): I know that, whatsoever God doeth, it shall be for ever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it: and God doeth it, that men should fear before him.

2 Chronicles 20:15 (Parallel theme): And he said, Hearken ye, all Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem, and thou king Jehoshaphat, Thus saith the LORD unto

you, Be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not your's, but God's.

Ephesians 1:11 (Parallel theme): In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

Deuteronomy 8:18 (Parallel theme): But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he sware unto thy fathers, as it is this day.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 (Parallel theme): Again, I considered all travail, and every right work, that for this a man is envied of his neighbour. This is also vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 7:13 (Parallel theme): Consider the work of God: for who can make that straight, which he hath made crooked?

Job 34:29 (Parallel theme): When he giveth quietness, who then can make trouble? and when he hideth his face, who then can behold him? whether it be done against a nation, or against a man only:

Jeremiah 46:6 (Parallel theme): Let not the swift flee away, nor the mighty man escape; they shall stumble, and fall toward the north by the river Euphrates.