

Habakkuk 2:13

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Behold, is it not of the LORD of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity?

Analysis

Behold, is it not of the LORD of hosts that the people shall labour in the very fire, and the people shall weary themselves for very vanity? God declares the futility of unjust labor. **Is it not of the LORD of hosts** (בָּלֹא הָבֵה מִאָת) —this comes from the LORD of armies, the sovereign commander of heaven's forces. **That the people shall labour in the very fire** (וַיַּגְעַו עָמִים בְּדִין-אָשׁ) —peoples exhaust themselves only for fire. Their labor produces nothing lasting; it all burns up. **bedei** (בְּדֵי) means 'enough for' or 'sufficient for'—they work just enough to fuel the fire of judgment.

And the people shall weary themselves for very vanity (וְלֹא-עָמִים בְּדִין-רִיק יַעֲפּוּ) —nations grow faint for mere emptiness. **rik** (רִיק) means empty, vain, nothing. All the effort, all the building, all the conquest—it amounts to nothing, produces nothing lasting. This echoes Ecclesiastes: 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity' (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Work disconnected from God and justice produces nothing eternal. Jeremiah 51:58 quotes this verse directly about Babylon: 'The broad walls of Babylon shall be utterly broken, and her high gates shall be burned with fire; and the people shall labour in vain.' All human achievement apart from God ends in fire and vanity.

Historical Context

Babylon's magnificent buildings, built through such enormous labor, stood less than a century before the city declined. The Hanging Gardens, one of the ancient world's seven wonders, disappeared completely—archaeologists still debate their exact location. The walls, gates, and palaces gradually crumbled. By the time of Christ, Babylon was largely ruins. Centuries of labor produced structures that burned, crumbled, or vanished. The contrast with Jerusalem is striking: though destroyed multiple times, Jerusalem remains a living city, because it was built on God's purposes, not merely human ambition. The principle applies universally: work not grounded in God's justice and purposes ultimately produces nothing lasting (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Only what's done for God's kingdom endures.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How can you ensure your labor produces lasting fruit rather than 'very vanity' that ultimately burns?
2. What is the difference between human ambition that ends in futility and work grounded in God's purposes that endures eternally?
3. How does this verse challenge cultural definitions of success that emphasize achievement, building, and legacy apart from justice and righteousness?

Interlinear Text

וְאַתָּה H3808	מֵאָתָה H2009	מֵאָתָה H853	וְאַתָּה Behold is it not of the LORD H3068	וְאַתָּה of hosts H6635	וְאַתָּה shall labour H3021
עָמִים that the people H5971	בְּבֹרֶא in the very H1767	בְּבֹרֶא fire H784	עָמִים and the people H3816	בְּבֹרֶא in the very H1767	עָמִים vanity H7385
אָש fire H784	אָש and the people H3816	אָש in the very H1767	אָש vanity H7385	אָש shall weary H3286	אָש shall weary H3286

Additional Cross-References

Jeremiah 51:58 (References Lord): Thus saith the LORD of hosts; The broad walls of Babylon shall be utterly broken, and her high gates shall be burned with fire; and the people shall labour in vain, and the folk in the fire, and they shall be weary.

Isaiah 50:11 (Parallel theme): Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks that ye have kindled. This shall ye have of mine hand; ye shall lie down in sorrow.

Isaiah 55:2 (Parallel theme): Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness.

Proverbs 21:30 (References Lord): There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the LORD.

Malachi 1:4 (References Lord): Whereas Edom saith, We are impoverished, but we will return and build the desolate places; thus saith the LORD of hosts, They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever.

Psalms 39:6 (Parallel theme): Surely every man walketh in a vain shew: surely they are disquieted in vain: he heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them.