

Psalms 144:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Man is like to vanity: his days are as a shadow that passeth away.

Analysis

Man is like to vanity (אָנָם לְקַצֵּל קָטָה)—Hevel (breath, vapor, vanity) is Ecclesiastes's key word for life's transience. Damah (is like, resembles) compares human existence to morning mist. **His days are as a shadow that passeth away** (yamav ketzel over)—shadows fleeting across the ground, here then gone, insubstantial and ephemeral.

This stark realism balances v. 3's wonder. Humanity is simultaneously significant (God knows us) and insignificant (we are vapor). This paradox pervades Scripture: made in God's image yet formed from dust (Genesis 2:7), crowned with glory yet mortal (Psalm 8:5), beloved by God yet 'passing away' (James 4:14, 1 John 2:17). Only union with the eternal God through Christ gives human life enduring significance.

Historical Context

David, despite power and wealth, knew human frailty intimately: exile from Saul, Absalom's rebellion, Bathsheba's child's death, aging body's weakness. Life's brevity was no abstract doctrine but lived reality. James 4:14 and 1 Peter 1:24 (quoting Isaiah 40:6-8) echo this psalm, contrasting human transience with God's eternal word.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does acknowledging life's brevity ('like to vanity') change your priorities and use of time?
2. What practices help maintain the biblical balance between life's significance (v. 3) and transience (v. 4)?
3. How does the gospel transform the despair of human mortality into hope for eternal life in Christ?

Interlinear Text

עֹזֶר: כַּאֲלֵה בְּלֹא אֶתְמָה לְהַבְּלִי יְמֵי יְמֵי הַיּוֹם כַּאֲלֵה
Man to vanity is like his days are as a shadow that passeth away
H120 H1892 H1819 H3117 H6738 H5674

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 102:11 (Parallel theme): My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.

Psalms 109:23 (Parallel theme): I am gone like the shadow when it declineth: I am tossed up and down as the locust.

Job 8:9 (Parallel theme): (For we are but of yesterday, and know nothing, because our days upon earth are a shadow:)

Ecclesiastes 12:8 (Parallel theme): Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity.

2 Samuel 14:14 (Parallel theme): For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again; neither doth God respect any person: yet doth he devise means, that his banished be not expelled from him.

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org