

Psalms 39:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

Surely every man walketh in a vain shew—The Hebrew *aḵ-bəšelem yithallēḵ-’îsh* (אַךְ-בְּשֵׁלֶם יִתְהַלֵּךְ-אִישׁ) literally means "only in an image walks man." The word *šelem* (שֵׁלֶם, image/shadow) is the same used in Genesis 1:27 for humanity made in God's image, but here it suggests phantom or mere appearance. David's point is devastating: human life, for all its busyness, is as insubstantial as a shadow. The verb *hālaḵ* (walk/go about) describes daily activity, yet it's all **a vain shew**—empty appearance without substance.

Surely they are disquieted in vain (*aḵ-heḇel yehemāyûn*, אַךְ-הֶבֶל יַהֲמִיּוּן)—*Heḇel* (הֶבֶל, vanity/vapor) is the key word in Ecclesiastes, meaning breath, vapor, or futility. The verb *hāmāh* means to be in tumult, roar, or agitate—like waves crashing. Humanity rushes about in frantic activity, yet it's all **in vain**, producing nothing of lasting value. **He heapeth up riches, and knoweth not who shall gather them**—This echoes Ecclesiastes 2:18-21. The participle *šōḇēr* (צֹבֵר, heaps up) suggests accumulating wealth with great effort, yet total ignorance of who will ultimately benefit.

This verse cuts to the heart of existential emptiness apart from God. All human striving—unless rooted in eternal purpose—is vapor. Jesus would later warn against laying up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19-21) and tell the parable of the rich fool who accumulated much but died that night (Luke 12:16-21). Only what's done for God's kingdom has permanence; everything else is shadow-walking.

Historical Context

David wrote from the perspective of Israel's wealthiest king who had accumulated immense riches (1 Chronicles 29:3-5). Yet even his vast wealth couldn't purchase more time or ultimate meaning. Solomon, his son, would inherit the wealth and expand these themes in Ecclesiastes, demonstrating that even royal wisdom and resources cannot overcome life's fundamental brevity.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. In what areas of your life are you 'walking in a vain show'—going through motions without substance or eternal purpose?
2. How does the certainty that someone else will gather what you accumulate change your priorities today?
3. What would it look like to exchange frantic, futile 'disquiet' for restful focus on the things that matter eternally?

Interlinear Text

אֵן H389	בְּצֵלַם H6754	יִתְהַלֵּךְ H1980	אֵן יִשׁ H376	אֵן בֶּל H389	יִתְהַלֵּךְ H1892
	in a vain shew	walketh	Surely every man	in vain	
	יִתְהַלֵּךְ H1993	יִתְהַלֵּךְ H6651	וְלֹא H3808	יִדְעוּ H3045	וְיִתְהַלֵּךְ H4310
	surely they are disquieted	he heapeth up		riches and knoweth	
	אֲסָפָם H622				
	not who shall gather				

Additional Cross-References

Ecclesiastes 2:26 (Parallel theme): For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ecclesiastes 12:13 (Parallel theme): Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecclesiastes 5:14 (Parallel theme): But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and there is nothing in his hand.

1 Corinthians 7:31 (Parallel theme): And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.

James 4:14 (Parallel theme): Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

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 13:22 (Parallel theme): A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just.

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

Luke 12:29 (Parallel theme): And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind.

1 Peter 5:7 (Parallel theme): Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.