



# SOLOMON

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By  
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1890

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Ecclesiastes i. 12–14.

I the Preacher was king over Israel in Jerusalem. 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. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

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All have heard of Solomon the Wise. His name has become a proverb among men. It was still more a proverb among the old Rabbis, the lawyers and scribes of the Gospels.

Their hero, the man of whom they delighted to talk and dream, was not David, the Psalmist, and the shepherd-boy, the man of many wanderings, and many sorrows: but his son Solomon, with all his wealth, and pomp and magic wisdom. Ever since our Lord's time, if not before it, Solomon has been the national hero of the Jews; while David, as the truer type and pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ, has been the hero of Christians.

The Rabbis, with their Eastern fancy—childishly fond, to this day, of gold, and jewels, and outward pomp and show—would talk and dream of the lost glories of Solomon's court; of his gilded and jewelled temple, with its pillars of sandal-wood from Ophir, and its sea of molten brass; of his ivory lion-throne, and his three hundred golden shields; of his fleets which went away into the far Indian sea, and came back after three years with foreign riches and curious beasts. And as if that had not been enough, they delighted to add to the truth fable upon fable. The Jews, after the time of the Babylonish captivity, seem to have more and more identified Wisdom with mere Magic; and therefore Solomon was, in their eyes, the master of all magicians. He knew the secrets of the stars, and of the elements, the secrets of all charms and spells. By virtue of his magic seal he had power over all those evil spirits, with which the Jews believed the earth and sky to be filled. He could command all spirits, force them to appear to him and bow before him, and send them to the ends of the earth to do his bidding. Nothing so fantastic, nothing so impossible, but those old Scribes and Pharisees imputed it to their idol, Solomon the Wise.

The Bible, of course, has no such fancies in it, and gives us a sober and rational account of Solomon's wisdom, and of Solomon's greatness.

It tells us how, when he was yet young, God appeared to him in a dream, and said, Ask what I shall give thee. And Solomon made answer—

‘ . . . O Lord my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king instead of David my father; and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in.

‘Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people?

‘And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing.

‘And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment;

‘Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee.

‘And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honor: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days.’

And the promise, says Solomon himself, was fulfilled.

In his days Judah and Israel were many, as the sand which is by the sea-shore, for multitude, eating and drinking and making merry; and Solomon reigned over all kings, from the river to the land of the Philistines and the border of Egypt; and they brought presents, and served Solomon all the days of his life. And he had peace on all sides round about him. And Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his own vine and his own fig-tree, all the days of Solomon.

‘I was great,’ he says, ‘and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labor. . .

‘Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labor that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

‘And I turned myself to behold wisdom, and madness, and folly: for what can the man do that cometh after the king? even that which hath been already done.’

Yes, my dear friends, we are too apt to think of exceeding riches, or wisdom, or power, or glory, as unalloyed blessings from God. How many are there who would say,—if it were not happily impossible for them,—Oh that I were like Solomon! Happy man that he was, to be able to say of himself, ‘I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem. And whatsoever mine eyes desired, I kept not from them; I withheld not my heart from any joy, for my heart rejoiced in all my labour.’

To have everything that he wanted, to be able to do anything that he liked—was he not a happy man? Is not such a life a Paradise on earth?

Yes, my friends, it is. But it is the Paradise of fools.

Yet, Solomon was not a fool. He says expressly that his wisdom remained with him through all his labour. Through all his pleasure he kept alive the longing after knowledge. He even tried, as he says, wine, and mirth, and folly, yet acquainting himself with wisdom. He would try that, as well as statesmanship, and the rule of a great kingdom, and the building of temples and palaces, and the planting of parks and gardens, and his three thousand Proverbs, and his Songs a thousand and five; and his speech of beasts and of birds and of all plants, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop which groweth on the wall. He would know everything, and try everything. If he was luxurious and proud, he would be no idler, no useless gay liver. He would work, and discern, and know,—and at last he found it all out, and this was the sum thereof—‘Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity.’

He found no rest in pleasure, riches, power, glory, wisdom itself; he had learnt nothing more after all than he might have known, and doubtless did know, when he was a child of seven years old. And that was, simply to fear God and keep His commandments; for that was the whole duty of man.

But though he knew it, he had lost the power of doing it; and he ended darkly and shamefully, a dotard worshipping idols of wood and stone, among his heathen queens. And thus, as in David the height of chivalry fell to the deepest baseness; so in Solomon the height of wisdom fell to the deepest folly.

My friends, the truth is, that exceeding gifts from God like Solomon's are not blessings, they are duties; and very solemn and heavy duties. They do not increase a man's happiness; they only increase his responsibility—the awful account which he must give at last of the talents committed to his charge. They increase, too, his danger. They increase the chance of his having his head turned to pride and pleasure, and falling shamefully, and coming to a miserable end. As with David, so with Solomon. Man is nothing, and God is all in all.

And as with David and Solomon, so with many a king and many a great man. Consider those who have been great and glorious in their day. And in how many cases they have ended sadly! The burden of glory has been too heavy for them to bear; they have broken down under it.

The great Charles the Fifth, Emperor of Germany and King of Spain and all the Indies: our own great Queen Elizabeth, who found England all but ruined, and left her strong and rich, glorious and terrible: Lord Bacon, the wisest of all mortal men since the time of Solomon: and, in our own fathers' time, Napoleon Buonaparte, the poor young officer, who rose to be the conqueror of half Europe, and literally the king of kings,—how have they all ended? In sadness and darkness, vanity and vexation of spirit.

Oh, my friends! if ever proud and ambitious thoughts arise in any of our hearts, let us crush them down till we can say with David: 'Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me.'

'Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother; my soul is even as a weaned child.'

And if ever idle and luxurious thoughts arise in our hearts, and we are tempted to say, 'Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry;' let us hear the word of the Lord crying against us: 'Thou fool! This night shall thy soul be required of thee. Then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?'

Let us pray, my friends, for that great—I had almost said, that crowning grace and virtue of moderation, what St. Paul calls sobriety and a sound mind. Let us pray for moderate appetites, moderate passions, moderate honors, moderate gains, moderate joys; and, if sorrows be needed to chasten us, moderate sorrows. Let us long violently after nothing, or wish too eagerly to rise in life; and be sure that what the Apostle says of those who long to be rich is equally true of those who long to be famous, or powerful, or in any way to rise over the heads of their fellow-men. They all fall, as the Apostle says, into foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition, and so pierce themselves through with many sorrows.

And let us thank God heartily if He has put us into circumstances which do not tempt us to wild and vain hopes of becoming rich, or great or admired by men.

Especially let us thank Him for this quiet country life which we lead here, free from ambition, and rash speculation, and the hope of great and sudden gains. All know, who have watched the world, how unwholesome for a man's soul any trade or occupation is which offers the chance of making a rapid fortune. It has hurt the souls of too many merchants and manufacturers ere now. Good and sober-minded men there are among them, thank God, who can resist the temptation, and are content to go along the plain path of quiet and patient honesty; but to those who have not the sober spirit, who have not the fear of God before their eyes, the temptation is too terrible to withstand; and it is not withstood; and therefore the columns of our newspapers are so often filled with sad cases of bankruptcy, forgery, extravagant and desperate trading, bubble fortunes spent in a few years of vain show and luxury, and ending in poverty and shame.

Happy, on the other hand, are those who till the ground; who never can rise high enough, or suddenly enough, to turn their heads; whose gains are never great and quick enough to tempt them to wild speculation: but who can, if they will only do their duty patiently and well, go on year after year in quiet prosperity, and be content to offer up, week by week, Agur's wise prayer: 'Give me neither poverty nor riches, but feed me with food sufficient for me.'

They need never complain that they have no time to think of their own souls; that the hurry and bustle of business must needs drive religion out of their minds. Their life passes in a quiet round of labours. Day after day, week after week, season after season, they know beforehand what they have to do, and can arrange their affairs for this world, so as to give them full time to think of the world to come. Every week brings small gains, for which they can thank the God of all plenty; and every week brings, too, small anxieties, for which they can trust the same God who has given them His only-begotten Son, and will with Him freely give them all things needful for them; who has, in mercy to their souls and bodies, put them in the healthiest and usefulest of all pursuits, the one which ought to lead their minds most to God, and the one in which (if they be thoughtful men) they have the deep satisfaction of feeling that they are not working for themselves only, but for their fellow-men; that every sheaf of corn they grow is a blessing, not merely to themselves, but to the whole nation.

My friends, think of these things, especially at this rich and blessed harvest-time; and while you thank your God and your Saviour for His unexampled bounty in this year's good harvest, do not forget to thank Him for having given the sowing and the reaping of those crops to you; and for having called you to that business in life in which, I verily believe, you will find it most easy to serve and obey Him, and be least tempted to ambition and speculation, and the lust of riches, and the pride which goes before a fall.

Think of these things; and think of the exceeding mercies which God heaps on you as Englishmen,—peace and safety, freedom and just laws, the knowledge of His Bible, the teaching of His Church, and all that man needs for body and soul. Let those who have thanked God already, thank Him still more earnestly, and show their thankfulness not only in their lips, but in their lives; and let those who have not thanked Him, awake, and learn, as St. Paul bids them, from God's own witness of Himself, in that He has sent them fruitful seasons, filling their hearts with food and gladness:—let them learn, I say, from that, that they have a Father in heaven who has given them His only-begotten Son, and will with Him freely give them all things needful: only asking in return that they should obey His laws—to obey which is everlasting life.

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