

Solomon by Alexander Whyte



Wisdom of God was in Solomon 1 Ki 3:16-27, 28

LEST I MYSELF SHOULD BE A CASTAWAY

1 Corinthians 9:27+ but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

THE shipwreck of Solomon is surely the most terrible tragedy in all the world. For if ever there was a shining type of Christ in the Old Testament church, it was Solomon. If ever any one was once enlightened, and had tasted the heavenly gift, and was made a partaker of the Holy Ghost, and had tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, it was Solomon. If ever any young saint sought first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and had all these things added unto him, it was Solomon. If the kingdom of heaven was ever like a lord's servant with five talents, who went and traded with the same and made them other five talents, it was Solomon. If ever there was any one of whom it could be said that he had attained, and was already perfect, it was Solomon. If ever ship set sail on a sunny morning, but all that was left of her was a board or two on the shore that night, that ship was Solomon. A board or two of rare and precious wood, indeed; and some of them richly worked and overlaid with silver and gold—it was Solomon with his sermons, and his prayers, and his proverbs, and his songs, and his temple. If ever a blazing lighthouse was set up in the sea of life to warn every man and to teach every man, it was Solomon.

Solomon was born of a father and a mother, the knowledge of which was enough to sanctify and dedicate both him and them from his mother's womb. If ever it was said over any child's birth, Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound, it was surely over the birth, and the birth-gifts and graces of Solomon. If ever a father's and a mother's son said when he was come to years, And is this the manner of man, O Lord God? that son come to years was surely Solomon. And, then, with a tutor and governor like Nathan-Judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What more could have been done to my vineyard that I have not done in it? And then his father's deathbed, and all those terrible tragedies on the back of that; all ending in Solomon sitting down on the throne of Israel amid such a blaze of glory. Solomon would have been made of stone not to have been moved to make those vows, and promises, and choices of wisdom and truth and righteousness, which we read so beautifully that he did make at the beginning of his reign in Jerusalem.

The Holy Child Himself never dreamed a better dream than that dream was which Solomon dreamed after that day of a thousand burnt-offerings on the altar of Gibeon. And a nobler choice was never made by any elect man in his most waking and most enlightened hours, than was the choice that Solomon made that midnight in his sleep. As soon as Lord Melbourne had announced to the young Princess Victoria that she was now Queen of England, he opened the Bible and read to the young sovereign the story of Solomon's dream at Gibeon. It was a stroke of genius. It was an inspiration. It was a prophetic Scripture in her case and in ours. Would God it had come half as true in his case who dreamed the dream! '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 one arise like unto thee. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour; so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days.' And both the riches and the honour promised at Gibeon were all fulfilled in Jerusalem, till the half had not been told to Solomon.

Magnificent, a mountain of cedar and wrought gold, as Solomon's temple was, it is all gone to dust and ashes millenniums ago. As the Lord warned Solomon, the temple soon became an astonishment and a hissing. But the dedication prayer that Solomon offered

on the opening day before the altar is a far better prayer to us today than it was that day on which it first fell from Solomon's lips. Stone and timber, gold and silver, crumble to dust and are forgotten. But once a piece like that is composed, and spoken, and taken down, and read, it lasts for ever. No doubt it may be said in suspicion and in depreciation of Solomon that kings are wont to get their speeches and their prayers written for them by their ministers, secular and sacred; and that what falls from a king's lips before his people need not have come from his heart. But in the case of a king of Solomon's birth and upbringing and great gifts, such a libel would never have been let light had it not been that it is a real relief to hear it. If Solomon actually, and all of himself, made and offered that wonderful prayer, then when we think of it, he is more a mystery of perdition to us than ever. That wonderful discovery and operation of our day which is called Biblical Criticism has let in a most piercing and searching and edifying light, not only upon Bible books, but also upon Bible men. And upon no man more than upon both Solomon and his books. 'The prayer of Solomon,' says a scholar of no less grace and genius than of scholarship, 'so fully reproduced, and so evidently precomposed, may well have been written under Nathan's guidance.' He does not say positively that it was so precomposed and written. But he evidently believes, for his part, that it was; and he says what he does say in this matter for the sake of those who will let him say it, and not for those who will not. Had Solomon lived up to that prayer; no, I must not say that, for no man could do that, not Nathan himself; but if Solomon in all his unspeakable sensualities and idolatries had ever given the least sign or symptom that he felt shame for his life, or remorse when he remembered his prayer: had it not been for that, I, for one, could never have let it light on my mind that any one but Solomon himself composed what is here called Solomon's prayer. But I must say it is both a relief and an edification to my mind that the greatest castaway in the Bible may not have been the original and real and only author of one of the greatest and best prayers in the Bible. I can hold up my head better when I am opening a church and am reading and expounding this prayer, when I think of Nathan's pure and noble soul rather than of Solomon, who is so soon to be such a scandal and reprobation. I do not know how you feel about a matter like that. But I shall always return to that splendid prayer with the author of the parable of the one little ewe lamb before my mind, rather than the reprobate lover of no end of strange women, and the fatal father of Rehoboam. I can imagine many open-minded young men here, and many open-minded old men like Jonathan Edwards, who will go back to the prophetic precomposition and the prophetic reproduction of this great prayer with thankfulness to God for the splendid service that Christian scholarship is doing to Holy Scriptures, and not least to Solomon's psalms and songs and prayers and proverbs in our open-eyed, believing, and truly reverential day.

Our own Lord Bacon always comes to my mind when I think about Solomon. For Bacon also took all wisdom and all knowledge, past, present, and yet to be discovered, for his province. Bacon also spake of trees, from the cedar tree that is in Lebanon, even to the hyssop that springeth out of the wall. He spake also of beasts, and of fowls, and of creeping things, and of fishes. Bacon, like Solomon, put tongues into trees and made them speak proverbs. The streams round Verulam and Gorhambury ran excellent books to Bacon, till he extracted wisdom absolutely out of everything. Solomon's House in The New Atlantis is the best commentary that will ever be written on the wisdom of Solomon. Bacon's Essays are our English Book of Proverbs, and an English Ecclesiastes could easily be collected out of Bacon's Letters and Speeches. For he, too-

he felt from time to time
The littleness that clings to what is human,
And suffered from the shame of having felt it.

And then, with it all, Bacon's superb genius followed by his awful fall, makes us almost believe that Solomon has come back to this earth again in the lord chancellor of England. Only, how happy it would have made us had Nathan found among Solomon's parchments, and in Solomon's own handwriting, a psalm or prayer like that which Bacon's executors found in his dead desk. Will you join me in the following petitions out of Bacon's prostrate prayer: 'Most gracious Lord God, my merciful Father from my youth up, my Creator, my Redeemer, my Comforter. Thou, O Lord, soundest and searchest the depths and secrets of all hearts. Thou acknowledgest the upright in heart, Thou judgest the hypocrite, Thou ponderest men's thoughts and doings as in a balance, Thou measurest their intentions as with a line, vanity and crooked ways cannot be hidden from Thee. Lord, I have loved Thy assemblies. I have mourned for the divisions of Thy church. I have delighted in the brightness of Thy sanctuary. Thy creatures have been my books, but Thy Scriptures much more. I have sought Thee in the courts, in the fields, and in the gardens, but I have found Thee in Thy temples. Thousands have been my sins, and ten thousand my transgressions; but Thy sanctifications have remained with me, and my heart, through Thy grace, hath been an unquenched coal upon Thy altar. As Thy favours have increased upon me, so have Thy corrections; so as Thou hast been always near me, O Lord, and ever as my worldly blessings were exalted, so secret darts from Thee have pierced me; and when I have ascended before men, I have descended in humiliation before Thee. Besides my innumerable sins, I confess before Thee that I am debtor to Thee for the gracious talent of Thy gifts and graces, which I have neither put into a napkin nor put it as I ought to exchangers, but have mis-spent it in things for which I was least fit, so as I may truly say my soul hath been a stranger in the house of my pilgrimage. Be merciful unto me, O Lord, and guide me in Thy ways, and afterwards receive me to glory.' No. That is not Solomon come back again. Would God it were! Solomon has nothing like that to come back with. That is Solomon's father come back to fallen Bacon. That is the man after God's own heart.

What malice there must be in our hearts when God's very best gifts to us, and our very best blessings, are turned by us to be our temptation and our snare! David's terrible fall took place not among the cruel rocks of his exile, but on the roof of the king's palace in

Jerusalem. And it was Solomon's very wisdom and wide understanding; it was his great riches; it was his wide dominion; it was his largeness of heart and his long and peaceful life that all worked together to make his path so slippery and so deadly. It is not to be wiser than what is written to say that it was not a vulgar and an everyday sensuality that made Solomon in the end such a castaway. There was that in it. But there were more things, and more seductive and dangerous things in it than that. There was this; There was what the inspired text calls largeness of heart-very much what we would call in our day openness and breadth of mind, hospitality and catholicity of mind, even to sympathy and symbolism with beliefs, with ways of worship, and with ways of no worship, against which it had been the divine call and whole ministry of Moses, and Aaron, and Joshua, and David to warn and to protect the children of Israel. That Solomon should go down to Egypt, of all places on the face of the earth, for his queen; that Pharaoh's daughter should sit on the throne of David, that must have given a shock to the more conservative, and sober, and thoughtful, and religious, and far-seeing minds in Israel-a shock that we wonder we do not hear more about it while Solomon is yet young and yet alive. We shall hear plenty about it when he is dead, and when Rehoboam's teeth are set on edge. No doubt, largeness of heart, even as the sand that is on the seashore, and breadth and openness of mind, and a catholic and a hospitable temper, and the charity that believeth all things and hopeth all things, is all of God, and is all to be seen in Jesus Christ and in His church. At the same time, such is the malignity of our hearts, that even charity itself has its temptations and its snares when it becomes our charity. Even grace itself, says Shepard, is flesh in respect of God. And Solomon's largeness of heart soon ended in sheer flesh itself. His wisdom as his life went on descended not from above. The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable. We see it every day. We see men absolutely revolting against all smallness of heart. They loath all your bigotry, and narrowness, and hardness, and suspicion, and superstition. They see a soul of good especially in things evil. They fraternise with men and with movements that their fathers abominated. They pare down and prune away the decalogue, and the creed, and the catechism, and the books of discipline of their godly upbringing. They rehabilitate and reinvest names and reputations that were a shame and a reproach in their father's house. They go down to Egypt for a wife, and they bring up her false gods with her. 'And it came to pass that, when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father.' And, if not in them, then in their children, all that Moses, and Aaron, and Joshua, and David had won for them and for their children at a great price is surrendered up and sold for naught, till the old great price has to be paid for it again in their children's sin, and suffering, and defeat, and captivity. Every generation has its own sword sent to it: its own peculiar trial of faith and holiness and severe obedience. And there is no shipwreck of faith and holiness and severe obedience in all the world that is written more for the men of our generation than just the terrible shipwreck of Solomon amid his wealth, and his wisdom, and his largeness of horizon and hospitality of heart, even to strange women and to their strange gods, till that end came which always comes.

The books of Solomon so-called-the Proverbs, the Ecclesiastes, and the Song-had a great struggle to get a footing inside the Old Testament. Each one of Solomon's books had its own difficulty to those who sifted out and sealed up the Hebrew Bible. There was something in all the books that were in any way associated with Solomon's name that made the Hebrew Fathers doubt their fitness for a place in Holy Scripture. There is one fatal want in them all. There is no repentance anywhere in Solomon. There is no paschal lamb, or young pigeon, or bitter herb among all the beasts, and birds, and hyssop-plants of which Solomon spoke and sang so much. There is no day of atonement, or so much as one of the many ordained sacrifices for sin, in any of Solomon's real or imputed writings. Both the sense of truth and the instinct of verisimilitude kept back all those who ever assumed Solomon's name from ever putting a penitential psalm, or a proverb of true repentance, in Solomon's mouth. The historical sense, as we call it, was already too strong for that even in the deathbed moralisings and soliloquisings that have come down to us under Solomon's name. There is no thirty-second, or fifty-first, or hundred and thirtieth Psalm of David in all the volume of 'Psalms of Solomon' that were composed in the century before Christ. No; there is no real repentance, real or assumed, anywhere in Solomon. There is remorse in plenty, and weariness of life, and discontent, and disgust, and self-contempt, bitterer to drink than blood. There is plenty of the sorrow that worketh death; but there is not one syllable of the repentance to salvation not to be repented of. 'All taste for pleasure is extinguished in the king's heart,' wrote Madame de Maintenon from the deathbed of Louis the Fourteenth. 'Old age and disappointment have taught him to make serious reflections on the vanity of everything he was formerly fond of.' Bathsheba might have written that letter from her dying son's bedside. Vanity of vanities, groaned out Solomon, with his heart full of the ashes of a lost life. All is vanity and vexation of spirit. Dreams at Gibeon, building of temples and kings' houses, largeness of heart, gifts of prophecy, a tongue of men and angels, proverbs and songs and Songs of songs-all is vanity if there is not along with it all constant repentance, daily self-denial, and a heart more and more perfect with God. The wise men of the east, wiser than Solomon, have a proverb upon the secret worm that was gnawing all the time in the royal staff upon which Solomon leaned.

THOUGHT - What, to end with, is the secret worm that is gnawing in your staff on which you lean?